Chillin' in Another World with LV 2 Super Cheat Powers

11

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

Chillin' in Another World

with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers Volume 11

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Story by Miya Kinojo ∞ Illustrations by Katagiri

Characters

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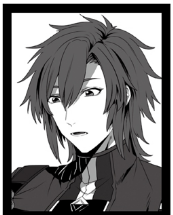
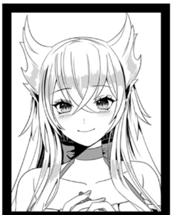


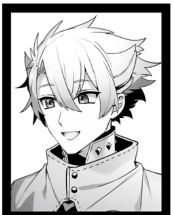
Flio

Former Hero Candidate and General Store Proprietor.



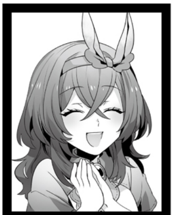
Rys

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



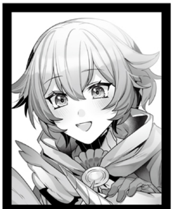
Garyl

Flio and Rys's son. Always worried about the Maiden Queen.



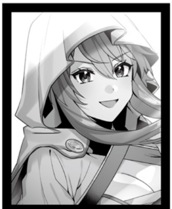
Elinàsze

Flio and Rys's daughter. A real daddy's girl.



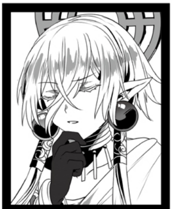
Rylnàsze

Elinàsze's little sister. Flio and Rys's youngest daughter.



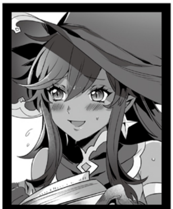
Ben'ne

Psychic remnant of a swordmaster haunting Ijo Bridge in the Land of the Rising Sun in search of a worthy opponent.



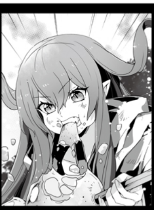
Hiya

The Djinn who Commands the Origin of Light and Darkness.



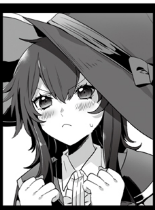
Damalynas

The Grand Magus of Midnight. In training in Hiya's mindscape.



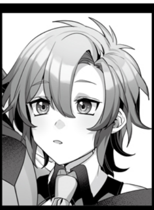
Wyne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats and a big appetite.



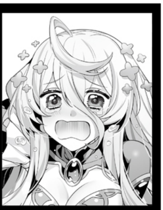
Belano

A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



Belalio

Minilio and Belano's child.



Telbyress

Drunkard of a no-gooddess who was exiled from the Celestial Plane. Lodging with Hokh'hokton.

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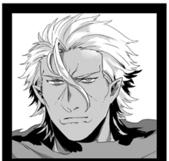
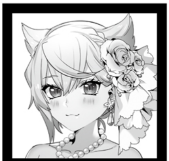


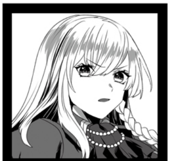
Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest Dark One in history.



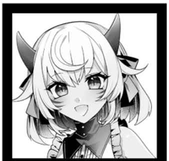
Uliminas

Ghozal's former confederate in the Dark Army and current wife.



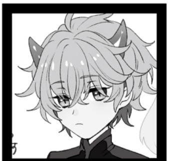
Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode and wife of Ghozal.



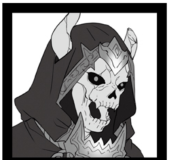
Folmina

Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.



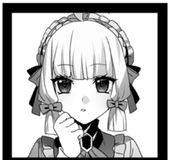
Ghoro

Ghozal and Balirossa's son.



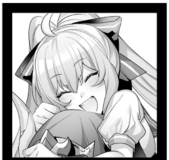
Calsi'im

Former Dark Regent now staying at Flio's house along with Tia.



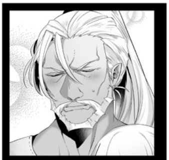
Tia

Magic doll who became Calsi'im's wife. Specialist in preparing tea.



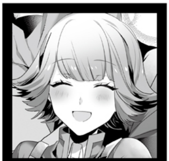
Rabbitz

Calsi'im and Tia's daughter. Loves to climb on top of Calsi'im's head.



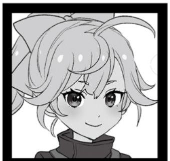
Sleip (Human Form)

Former member of the Infernal Four living in sin with Byleri.



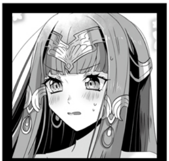
Byleri

Former archer of Klyrode living in sin with Sleip.



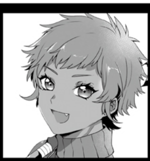
Rislei

Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



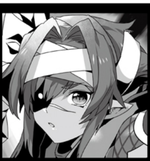
Ellie (The Maiden Queen)

Hardworking queen of the Magical Kingdom with a strong sense of justice.



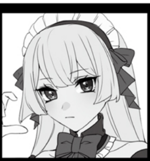
Blossom

A former knight of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.



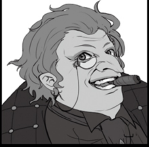
Greanyl

Shadow demon working for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.



Tanya

An amnisiac maid who showed up uninvited (Disciple of the Celestial Plane).



The Shadow King

The former King of Klyrode, and head of the Shadow Conglomerate.

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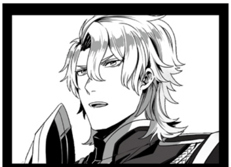
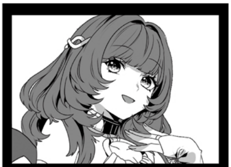


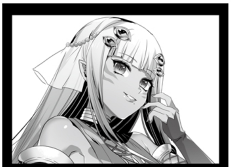
Hero Gold-Hair

On the run from the law despite being the "hero."



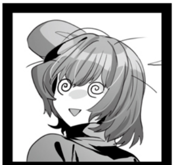
Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's partner in crime. Worried about the group's finances.



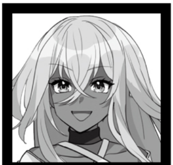
Valentine

A beguiling djinn and former Evil General of the Realm of Evil. A big eater despite her looks.



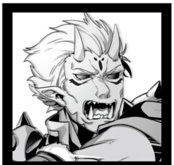
Aryun Keats

Member of the rare carriage djinn species, but her battle strength is nothing to speak of.



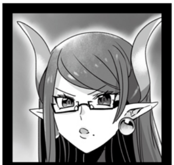
Wuha Gappoli

Member of the rare mansion djinn species, but no use at all in a fight.



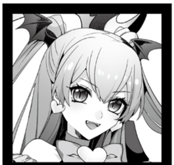
Dawkson

Ghozal's younger brother. Newly crowned Dark One and a believer in camaraderie.



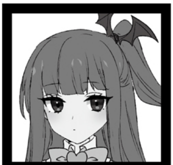
Phufun

Dawkson's minion, a succubus, and an extreme masochist.



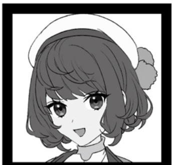
Belianna

A foul-mouthed devil who loves her little sister.



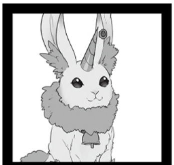
Irystiel

Garyl's classmate and Belianna's little sister.



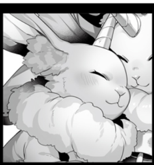
Salina

Garyl's classmate. Seems to have feelings for him, but...



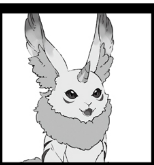
Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form)

Flio's household pet. Mate of the Unicorn Rabbit Shebe.



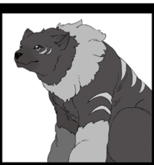
Shebe

Unicorn Rabbit who became Sybe's bride.



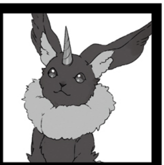
Sube

Child of Sybe and Shebe. Unicorn rabbit with slightly upturned eyes.



Sebe

Child of Sybe and Shebe. Well known for the adorable faces it makes.



Sobe

Child of Sybe and Shebe. A unicorn rabbit with coloration reminiscent of a psychobear.

Chapter 1: Flio and the Oni Village

The world of Klyrode was a world of sword and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans, where humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial. That came to an end, however, when the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—the greatest of the human kingdoms—signed a peace treaty with the Dark Army, marking the beginning of friendly relations between humanity and demonkind.

Recently, the Dark Army has begun establishing a strong social order centered around the Dark One Dawkson. Many demons refuse to amend their thinking from the belief that might makes right, but after persistent and stubborn negotiations, some of their number have shown themselves to be willing to lend an ear. Progress, however, has been slow, and the Dark One Dawkson has been very busy with errands in every corner of his territory.

Meanwhile, the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode has been establishing her own ruling court with her sisters serving as her left and right hands—the Second Princess, who has taken on diplomatic duties for the kingdom, and the Third Princess, who handles domestic affairs. With their help, the Magical Kingdom has been swiftly addressing its lingering troubles both internal and external, ushering in an age of glory unmatched in the whole history of the kingdom.

All seems to be well for the two peoples, but what issues may arise to trouble this newfound peace? The stage is set. The curtains rise...

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

Flio looked up at the clear blue sky as he passed through the gate to the Houghtow College of Magic. “Another sunny day,” he remarked, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

Flio was a merchant from another world who had been summoned to Klyrode as a candidate for the position of Hero. The blessing he was granted upon his arrival gave him mastery of every spell and skill to exist in the world. Now he had become the manager of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store along with his wife Rys, a lupine demon formerly of the Dark Army. The couple had four children together: a son and two daughters, as well as an adopted dragonewt.

Rys sidled up close as they walked along. When they had first met, she had regarded him as an enemy, but after a crushing victory at Flio's hands, she chose to stay by his side as his wife. She adored her husband to a somewhat excessive degree and was something of a mother to everyone who had come to live in Flio's house.

"Is it really necessary for you to bother yourself with resupplying the merchandise, my lord husband?" Rys asked, looking up at him with a dissatisfied pout. "Surely you could leave this to the supply teams as usual, or else allow me to do it for you! Say but a word, and I will have it done in a moment!"

Flio smiled warmly back at his wife. "I trust both you and the supply teams, of course!" he said. "But I've always thought it was important for a manager to see how things have been going firsthand once in a while. And besides..."

"Besides?" Rys asked.

"We've been so busy with everything going on lately that we've had hardly any time for just the two of us. I thought it might be nice to go on a little date together...if that's no trouble anyway!" Flio blushed shyly and glanced at the ground.

A moment passed, and then Rys's face—indeed, her entire upper body—turned bright red so suddenly it seemed to make an audible sound. She wrapped her arms around his. "O-Of course! It's no trouble at all! You're quite right—it's nice to go out like this from time to time, isn't it?!" The tufts of hair on her head wiggled like the ears of a very excited wolf, while the tail Rys had unconsciously materialized wagged happily back and forth.

Oh, Rys... Flio thought, wincing reflexively. *You let your tail out again!* But as he thought about it, his usual easygoing smile returned. *Well, on the other hand, with the world like it is now, that might not be much of a problem anymore...* Now that there was a peace treaty in place between the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and their ancient enemy, the Dark Army, humans and demons were growing more used to living alongside each other by the day.

Houghtow City is far from the capital anyway, Flio thought. *People here have always been accepting of demihumans and demons that aren't* *affiliated with the Dark Army. There's plenty of kids of all species in the lower-grade classes our own children attend at the Houghtow College of Magic. That kind of attitude seems like it's been spreading further by the day. I'd be surprised if anyone in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode would even bat an eye at a demon these days. It's been wonderful to see. In my old world, humans persecuted and oppressed demihumans, but in this one, discrimination like that seems to be slowly but surely vanishing. It's nice to think I was able to help make that happen...* He looked back at his wife Rys.

"My lord husband?" Rys asked, cocking her head curiously. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, not at all!" Flio said, smiling. "I was just thinking about how lucky I am that I get to be with you like this, Rys."

Rys's face once again went bright red at her husband's words. "M-M-My lord husband!" she exclaimed, her earlike hair tufts twitching and her tail wagging even more furiously than before. "Y-Y-You'll embarrass me if you say such things out of the blue like that! B-But it *does* make me very happy..."

Those tufts on her head are a remnant left over from her wolf form, Flio thought. *I don't think they're actual ears, but they sure do move to express her emotions, just like her tail...* He smiled shyly at Rys's exuberance. "W-Well," he said. "Let's go ahead and make our delivery to the school store. And once we're finished, maybe we can grab a quick bite to eat?"

"O-Our *date*, you mean!" Rys exclaimed happily. "Of course! I'd be happy to accompany you!" Rys squeezed Flio's arm tight and rubbed her cheeks up against his. She was clinging so close that her voluptuous bosom was pressed right up against Flio's arm, making him blush at the sensation.

Flio awkwardly cleared his throat in an attempt to hide his embarrassment and resumed walking, heading in the direction of one of the buildings on the Houghtow College of Magic campus.

Flio was here as a representative of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, which operated the school store for the Houghtow College of Magic. It was necessary for them to make regular visits to provide the store with supplies. Flio and Rys had decided to make the trip today themselves. They passed through the gate like always, and headed for the nearest building on the other side. Inside, Flio stepped up to a window marked "Office" and gave it a knock.

The window slid open and a middle aged man poked out his head. “Oh, if it isn’t Mister Flio!” he said. “Making a supply run for the school store?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Flio, smiling back at the man. “Good afternoon, Mister Taclyde.”

Taclyde was the sole administrator working for the Houghtow College of Magic. He saw to repairs and cleaning on campus and managed both tuition and the staff’s salaries quite capably all by his lonesome, a feat that had earned him a great deal of trust from the guardians of the children enrolled in the lower-grade classes.

“By the way,” Flio said. “Didn’t I hear something about the Houghtow College of Magic founding a new security firm?”

“You heard correctly!” answered Taclyde, giving Flio a grin and a cheesy thumbs-up. “It was a bit of an experiment on our part, to give our graduating students something to do, but it’s been going quite well so far. We’ve even lifted the restriction on faculty holding side jobs! We’re planning on forming another company as well, where our graduates can produce and sell items of their own. In fact, we would really appreciate the assistance of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store once that project gets off the ground, if you’d be so kind.”

“Of course!” said Flio. “We’d be more than happy to discuss business with you!”

The two exchanged pleasantries for a while as Rys watched the familiar scene with a smile on her face.

“Well,” Taclyde said, “I shouldn’t keep you too long. Oh! And if you’re looking for Garyl and Elinàsze, I believe they’re currently practicing their swordsmanship at the arena. Why don’t you stop by to watch once you’ve finished your business here?”

“Would that be allowed?” Flio asked.

“It would be no problem at all!” said Taclyde, giving Flio both another grin and another thumbs-up. “After all the help you’ve given us, we’d be thrilled to have you stop by! Besides, the school is open to the public today so that prospective students can come observe classes. The number of applicants has shot up lately thanks to those Enchanted Frigates, you know. It’s been good business for the school.”

Flio smiled as usual. “We’re very happy to hear that!” he said. “In that case, perhaps I’ll stop by to watch after I’ve made my delivery, if you’ll have us.” Taclyde bowed his head, and Flio stepped inside the school.

“That Taclyde man seems quite capable,” Rys remarked with a smile as she walked alongside Flio. “Even Uliminas speaks highly of him, you know.” Underneath her smile, however, Rys was thinking something else. “Of course, from the perspective of combat power, his strength isn’t enough to register in the slightest. He would be no use at all to my lord husband, I’m sure.”

U-Um...Rys... Flio thought, smirking to himself as the two made their way down the hall. *You know I can hear you, right?* Without meaning to, Rys had been speaking her thoughts out loud. *I know Rys has her own way of thinking about things, and that I’m always on her mind, but I wish she wouldn’t judge people based on how useful they are to me or how good they are in a fight...*

◇Houghtow College of Magic—School Store◇

The school store was located in a three-story building in the very middle of the Houghtow College of Magic campus. The second and third floors of the building served as a school dormitory, while the basement was reserved for storage. The first floor was divided between the school store and cafeteria, where the students living in the dormitory ate breakfast and dinner. The food in the cafeteria, like the school store itself, was provided by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

Inside, a woman dressed in a maid outfit was busy cleaning the school store area with a mop, scrubbing the floor clean with astonishing speed. When Flio and Rys stepped inside, she stopped what she was doing and dashed quickly up to them. “Master Flio and Mistress Rys,” she said. “I thank you for your assistance.”

“Hello, Tanya,” said Flio. “Thank *you* for your hard work in the school shop.” Tanya lifted up the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy.

Tanya had originally gone by the name Tanyalina—an angel from the Celestial Plane who held immense magic power. She was sent by her superiors to observe Flio, but she lost her memories after a freak collision with Wyne. Now she served as Flio’s household’s live-in maid.

There was a time when the school shop at Houghtow College of Magic was (mostly?) staffed by students working part-time. However, as the number of students increased, so did the number of shoppers—along with the variety of merchandise stocked and the amount of food requiring preparation. It had reached the point where part-time student workers simply couldn't keep up with everything that needed to be done. Today the duty fell to Tanya, who was more than capable of handling the business so that everything got done on time.

"I've brought the supplies," Flio said. "I'll go ahead and put them on the shelves." He held out his arm and a magic circle appeared in front of his outstretched hand. The items began appearing one after another on the storage shelves in the back of the shop. Flio had been keeping them safe in his mindscape, so he transferred them directly into storage. "I think that's everything you requested, but just send me a telepathic message if you need anything else, okay?"

"Perish the thought, Master Flio," said Tanya, bowing deeply. "It would not do to make you trouble yourself a second time. If I need something else, I will be sure to handle it myself."

You know, Flio thought, frowning, *Tanya's been focusing on her work at the school store, but she still manages to do all of the house's cleaning and laundry. I just hope she's finding the time to rest too. I'm worried about her...* "It seems like there's quite a few people staying in the dorms," he said. "Don't hesitate to tell me if you ever find yourself short-staffed. I'll take care of it right away."

"I thank you for your offer, but it is wholly unnecessary," said Tanya, bowing deeply once again. "I will bear it in mind, however, should such an impossibility ever come to pass." She had already begun checking the items in storage with her own magic even as she spoke with Flio, making sure that their stocks had been properly replenished.

Ordinarily, it was the Fli-o'-Rys General Store Supply Team who made these supply runs—the members of the Silent Listeners, the Dark Army's former intelligence apparatus. They delivered the items by wagon, and needless to say, they took much longer to complete the task than Flio.

"Oh, by the way..." Flio continued. "Didn't Wyne and Rylnàsze say they were going to stop by the College of Magic today?"

"Yes, Master Flio," Tanya answered with a curtsy. "I believe they are at the school's magic beast pasture, along with Young Mistress Folmina and Young Master Ghoro. There is no need to worry for their safety—I have been keeping a watchful eye on their condition using my Clairvoyance spell." Her left eye, which was a different color from her right, was shining with light, a sign that the spell Clairvoyance was indeed in effect.

"Thank you for all you do to look after the children, Tanya," Flio said, giving the angel maid a casual wave goodbye. "In that case, perhaps we'll pay them a visit before we stop by the arena."

"It is the least I could do for any member of your household, Master Flio," said Tanya, bowing. *And most especially, if I take my eyes off Young Mistress Wyne for even a moment, she's liable to start taking off her clothes in public...* she thought, the light in her eye growing brighter with renewed determination.

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Magic Beast Pasture◇

In one corner of the Houghtow College of Magic campus was a large open field where the school kept magic beasts for the students to practice their skills at taming magic, enchantment spells, and mounted combat. Near the middle of the pasture stood a particularly enormous black-furred magic beast, growling dangerously. It was crouched low on its hind legs, fangs bared as it menaced the boy before it—Garyl's classmate Sadjitta.

Sadjitta was capable of casting a healthy mix of offensive and defensive spells, but his abilities in both were somewhat lacking. He saw himself as Garyl's rival and set himself against him at every opportunity, but alas, it was not a competition he had any hope of winning.

Sadjitta's knees gave out, and he collapsed to the ground, staring back at the magic beast. "Wh-Wh-What's with this magic beast? It won't listen to me at all! And here I was gonna shut Garyl up for good by taming the biggest beast in the school..." The beast seemed clearly furious with Sadjitta. It was menacing him dangerously, and looked like it might attack at any moment.

"No, no, bad magic beast!" a small girl wearing a wide-brimmed hat called out as she ran up to the scene. "You shouldn't yell at people like that!"

It was Rylnàsze, Flio and Rys's youngest child. She had a natural affinity for taming and got along well with magic beasts of all sorts. Thanks to her natural talent, she had started helping out in the Houghtow College of Magic magic beast pasture despite being too young to attend school herself.

"Wh-Wh-What's going on, Rylnàsze?" Sadjitta pleaded. "It was so docile when you were feeding it... Why did it suddenly lose its temper like that?!"

"This magic beast is very sweet, but it also has a lot of pride," Rylnàsze explained to the distressed boy. "It only makes sense for it to get angry after you got in its face like that and said, '*Hey! Magic beast! I'm gonna make you my familiar, so show some gratitude!*'" In fact, the smaller magic beasts drawing closer all around them seemed quite upset at Sadjitta for his behavior as well.

"D-D-Did I say that...?" Sadjitta asked, looking frightfully between the beast and Rylnàsze.

"Well, that aside, I need to calm the magic beast down!" said Rylnàsze, flapping her hands as she approached.

The black-furred magic beast was quite large—more than five times Rylnàsze's size—and right now, it was controlled by its considerable anger. Enraged, it raised its right forepaw to swipe at Rylnàsze.

"Eeek!" Rylnàsze shrieked, her eyes going wide. Immediately, the magic beasts in the area all gathered in front of Rylnàsze to protect her.

"Hey!" came Wyne's voice from overhead. "Leave Ryl-Ryl alone-alone, or you're gonna answer to me!"

Wyne was a dragonewt, said to be the mightiest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys once rescued her when she had collapsed on the side of the road, however, and adopted her into their family. She had since become a doting older sister to Elinàsze and the other children.

Wyne dived from the sky, aiming a headbutt at the black-furred magic beast's skull. Their heads collided with a sickening *crack* and the beast staggered back, glaring daggers at Wyne, who had bashed it with her own cranium.

"Hmph!" Wyne said, rubbing her head as she glared back. "You've got a pretty hard head-head!"

"B-Big sister Wyne!" Rylnàsze said, hurrying up to the dragonewt with a cold towel in her hand and a worried look on her face. "That magic beast's body is exceptionally hard, you know! And its head is the hardest part of all!" The crowd of smaller magic beasts surrounding her followed suit, gazing at Wyne with worried expressions of their own.

"Nothing to worry about!" Wyne declared, giving Rylnàsze and the beasts a great big grin. "Your big sis Wyne is invincible-

invincible!” She lowered herself to all fours and her dragon tail appeared from her behind, sticking out of the poncho-style outfit she was wearing. The tail turned silver and split into two as silver dragon scales spread over Wyne’s entire body like metallic armor. “Grrrrrr!” she growled a warning in a dragon-like voice as she glared down the magic beast. Finally, her poncho split apart, revealing a great pair of silver wings. However frightening she had been before, in this form she was many, many times more intimidating. The black-furred magic beast flinched back in fear.

Rylnàsze, however, watched her big sister’s transformation with shining eyes, as if she had completely forgotten that the magic beast was even there. “Oh my gosh, wow!” she gushed. “Amazing, big sister Wyne! That was evolution! I’ve never seen a draconic evolution before!”

Folmina and Ghoro ran up when they saw what was happening as well, abandoning their work changing out the straw for the magic beasts to sleep on. Folmina and Ghoro were Ghozal’s children with his two wives, the hellcat Uliminas and the human Balirossa—Folmina with Uliminas and Ghoro with Balirossa. Both of them treated all three of their parents equally as family. Folmina was a girl and was infatuated with Garyl, while Ghoro, a boy of few words, was equally infatuated with his sister Folmina.

“That was incredible, Wyne!” said Folmina. She was still carrying a large bale of straw in her arms. “Amazing! Super awesome!”

“It was...” agreed Ghoro. “You were cool...”

Suddenly, Wyne found herself surrounded by people gazing at her with envy and awe. “I am-am?” she said happily. “You think I’m cool-cool?”

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Soon, the staff of the Houghtow College of Magic came running to the magic beast pasture, responding to the panic alarm Sadjitta had pressed. Belano and Minilio were at their head.

Belano had once served a knightly company at Klyrode Castle as a witch. She was slight of build, shy, and unable to use any spells other than defensive magic. After quitting the knighthood, she had come to live at Flio’s house and worked as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic.

Minilio, meanwhile, was a magic doll created by Flio as an experiment. He had been given the name Minilio because he resembled a younger version of Flio himself. Minilio and Belano had since gotten married and had a child named Belalio. These days, Minilio would spend his time assisting Belano at the College of Magic. It was through that work, in fact, that the two of them had first gotten close.

Belano's shoulders heaved with effort from running as she stared blankly at the scene playing out in the middle of the pasture. The other teachers around her seemed no less at a loss. After all, they had arrived to see Wyne surrounded by Rylnàsze, Folmina, and Ghoro, all gazing at her with eyes that seemed to practically sparkle.

"Big sister Wyne, how were you able to evolve your wings like that?" asked Rylnàsze.

"I wanna see more of your moves, Wyne!" demanded Folmina. "That was super cool!"

"I wanna see more too..." agreed Ghoro.

"I was cool-cool?" echoed Wyne, posing for her admirers. "Then come see more-more!" She looked absolutely thrilled at the attention.

"Excuse me..." said Belano, approaching Sadjitta, who had pressed the panic button. He was sitting on the ground, slumped over. "Sadjitta...? What happened...?"

"O-Oh, u-um, Miss Belano..." Sadjitta said, pointing a trembling finger towards the magic beast behind Wyne. "Th-That magic beast went crazy..."

Belano and the other teachers looked where Sadjitta was pointing, more confused than ever. The black-furred magic beast was sprawled out, lying on its back with its belly exposed.

The magic beast had forgotten itself in its rage at Sadjitta's attitude, but that headbutt from Wyne had returned it to its senses. Realizing right away that it had no hope of defeating the newly evolved Wyne, it adopted a pose of absolute submission.

"That magic beast went crazy...?" Belano asked.

"Y-Yes...that's right..."

"But," said Belano, looking between the panicked Sadjitta and the magic beast, "right now it's showing submission..."

Just then Tanya appeared from behind, moving with extraordinary speed. In her hand, she clutched a pair of panties, her gaze fixed on Wyne. It had been forgotten in the excitement, but the silver scales that appeared on Wyne’s body during her evolution had torn her clothing to shreds, including, naturally enough, her underwear. As such, she was very nearly entirely naked.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” Tanya said, both of her eyes shining with a bright light. “You removed your underwear again!” Angel wings appeared from her back, increasing her speed even further.

“Gwah!” Wyne cried, her eyes opening wide in shock at seeing the maid so close already. “Tan-Tan!” She took off as fast as she could.

“Wait right there, Young Mistress Wyne! Be a good girl and put on your underwear!”

“No way!” Wyne shouted back. “Underwear feels all icky-icky!”

“You must! Now come here!”

“No way, no way!”

Tanya took off after the fleeing Wyne, pursuing her on a merry chase all around the Houghtow College of Magic.

“Those two are at it again, I see…” said Flio, looking up with a smirk as he made his way to the magic beast pasture himself to see Wyne soar past overhead, followed closely by Tanya.

“It’s good to see the two of them in such high spirits,” said Rys, smiling as she gazed up as well.

It looked like the chase was going to last for quite some time.

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Arena◇

“Huh?” Garyl said, cocking his head with a puzzled expression on his face as he looked out the window. “Did something just happen over at the magic beast pasture?”

Garyl was one of Flio and Rys’s children—the younger twin of Elinàsze, and Rylnàsze’s older brother. His ready smile and friendly, good-humored personality had earned him a great deal of popularity at the Houghtow College of Magic, and his physical abilities were without peer. Meanwhile, his older twin, Elinàsze, was a serious-minded young lady and a genius in magic who absolutely adored her papa Flio.

Elinàsze, who had been carrying a sword and standing beside Garyl, let out the breath she had been holding. “Well, if big sis Wyne and Tanya have begun playing chase, I suppose the problem has been resolved.” Her eyes were flashing with all the colors of the rainbow, and the jewel on her forehead emitted a brilliant prismatic light as it did whenever she released her full magic power.

Elinàsze had been born with a sacred jewel on her forehead, a sign of the goddess’s blessing. Elinàsze boasted rare abilities when it came to magic, but it was the gem on her forehead that was the source of her inexhaustible wellspring of magic power. She had sensed the disturbance happening in the magic beast pasture and quickly used her magic to learn what was happening.

Honestly, though… Elinàsze thought to herself as she scanned the area with her Search spell. *I know I’m doing this for Garyl’s sake, but helping out with the fencing club really is such a chore. I really am much better at magic…* Suddenly, her eyes jolted open. *That presence! It’s hidden by a weak Concealment spell, but I’d recognize it anywhere! Papa’s coming this way!* She clenched her sword arm with determination. *I must show papa my good side! My very coolest and* *cutest side!* Elinàsze had a tendency to make things more complicated than they had to be when her beloved papa, Flio, was involved. “Well, now that that’s figured out, let’s get back to it! Here I come, Rislei! Take this!” Without missing a beat, she leaped towards her sparring partner, Rislei.

Rislei, half lichsteed and half human, was Sleip and Byleri’s daughter. She was a serious, hardworking girl and something of a leader figure for the younger children in Flio’s household.

“Wah!” Rislei cried. “Wh-What’s with you all of a sudden, Elinàsze?! Where did all this motivation come from?!”

“There’s nothing ‘with me’ at all!” Elinàsze insisted. “I am always ready for some action!”

“What?! Eli, you’re acting like a completely different person!” Rislei said, skillfully stepping out of the way of Elinàsze’s sword.

“Clever, aren’t you?” Elinàsze said, casting a spell without lowering her sword. A vast array of swords of light appeared from a colossal magic circle behind Elinàsze’s back. “Well, let’s see if you can dodge *this*!”

Rislei’s eyes went wide in the face of the sheer number of swords coming her way. “Wait! Th-That’s against the rules!”

Just then, Reptor the lizardfolk boy, one of the children’s classmates, ran up next to Rislei. “I knew she was too much for one of us alone! I’ve got your back, Rislei!”

Reptor often came across as standoffish at a glance, but he was an earnest boy who worked hard to look after the people around him, and he was quite popular in school too. He had a particular fondness for Rislei.

“Th-Thanks, Reptor!” said Rislei as the two faced off side by side against Elinàsze.

“Ah ha ha!” Elinàsze laughed. “A perfect handicap! Now, prepare yourselves!” The swords of light came flying towards Rislei and Reptor, but as they drew close, they shattered with a high pitched *plink*, destroyed by someone else’s spell. Belalio had appeared without warning between the two and Elinàsze, using the spell Teleportation to arrive in time to neutralize her attack.

Belalio was the child of Minilio and Belano. As the offspring of a magic doll and a human, they were a being of utmost rarity. Like Minilio, they resembled a younger Flio in appearance, but they wore androgynous dress, keeping their gender ambiguous. Belalio would ordinarily be considered too young to enroll in school, but since both Belano and Minilio worked in the Houghtow College of Magic, they were able to arrange for their child to be given special permission to attend. Or rather, an exception was made when the entrance examination revealed them to have both incredible magic power and exceptional skill at spellcasting.

"Aha!" said Rislei. "We've got Lio in our corner too! Thanks for the help!"

"All right!" Reptor cheered. "Let's go, the three of us!"

Belalio nodded silently.

Minilio the magic doll, incidentally, was wholly incapable of producing vocalizations. It seemed that his child Belalio took after their father in many respects.

Elinàsze prepared three spells at once to meet the combined forces of Rislei, Reptor and Minilio, launching blades of light one after another. Belalio destroyed the projectiles using their own magic as they came the party's way, but Elinàsze was summoning them faster than Belalio could keep up. Even fighting three against one, Elinàsze had them on the ropes. "Ah ha ha ha ha!" she cackled. "Three of you, is it? No problem whatsoever! This is the perfect opportunity to show papa how dashing—yet adorable—I can be!"

Garyl smirked knowingly as he watched the battle from the sidelines. "That sister of mine always starts acting like a different person whenever dad's about to show up..." he mused, only half aware that he was speaking out loud. "But if she's shooting for dashing and adorable, I'd say she landed somewhere more in the territory of a final boss fight. It reminds me of when Uncle Ghozal starts going all out..."

"U-Uncle Ghozal?!" Elinàsze exclaimed, visibly panicking at Garyl's words.

"Ah!" said Rislei. "Eli's open!"

"Get her!" cried Reptor.

Not wanting to let their chance go to waste, Rislei and the other children rushed forward as one.

Huh? Garyl thought to himself, furrowing his brow as the fight turned against his sister. *Did I say something I shouldn't have...?*

"I wish you wouldn't ignore me so, Lord Garyl. Won't you tell me if I'm holding my sword correctly?" Salina cooed, sidling up beside him. Salina was a young noblewoman who admired Garyl and specialized in water elemental magic. She too had joined the fencing club in order to support Garyl, the object of her affection.

She had shown up dressed lightly, showing off a somewhat excessive amount of bare skin. Ostensibly this was for the sake of maneuverability, but the truth is that she was hoping the outfit would attract Garyl's attention.

"Oh!" said Garyl. "Sorry, my bad! Um...you should be holding it a little more like this..." He took Salina's hands in his to correct her guard, his upper body pressing against hers from behind.

Eheee?! Salina screamed internally, her face turning red as her breath came out hot and heavy. *L-L-Lord Garyl is about to push me to the ground! Oh... To think I should be poised to have my first time at this very moment!* Her mind raced with all sorts of frantic delusions, imagining all the things Garyl might do to her after forcing her down...

"Mreowr!" Suddenly, Salina's face was smothered with a plush black cat, snapping her out of her happy state. It was Irystiel, wearing the same black gothic lolita dress she wore day-to-day and pressing her plush doll onto Salina's face.

"Mrgf!" Salina cried.

Irystiel was another of Garyl's admirers, a girl with an affinity for curse magic. She was the younger sister of none other than Belianna, one of the Dark Army's Infernal Four, but that was a fact she had kept secret from her classmates. She too had joined the fencing club in order to show her support for Garyl.

"Quit hogging Garyl to yourself!" the plushy snapped, Irystiel skillfully using her ventriloquism to manipulate its voice. "Irystiel says he's supposed to be teaching her too! Mreowr!"

"Excuse me?!" Salina huffed. "Garyl was merely helping me with my stances! *You* can learn from our instructor Miss Murasame, like all the other good boys and girls!"

"Shut it!" said the plush cat. "Irystiel only joined this club so she could make out with Garyl! Here, listen! She's saying, '*Why should I have to make out with Miss Murasame instead?!*' Mreowr!"

Irystiel was far too shy to say more than a few words using her own voice, but with the plushy hurling nonstop invective in her stead, she had no problems expressing her true feelings.

Salina, for her part, showed no sign of backing down before the foulmouthed doll. Before long, the two were in each others' faces exchanging barbs of alarming savagery. "Oh no..." said Garyl, frowning as he watched. "They're not gonna settle down for a while, now that they've gotten like this..." Just then, a number of miniature dwarves stepped up to Garyl's feet. They were armed with wooden swords, which they brandished as they hopped and pranced around him. It looked as if they were performing some sort of dance. "Oh! Did Snow Little summon these dwarves?"

"Tee hee hee!" giggled the girl in the white dress standing behind Garyl, daintily hiding her mouth with her fingertips as she stepped up behind him. "Well spotted, Lord Garyl! I would expect nothing less." This was Snow Little, a fable folk girl with a talent for summoning magic who Garyl had inadvertently charmed. Her older sister, Snow White, had been one of the candidates for the Dark One Dawkson's hand in marriage, but as with Irystiel's sister, that detail was not shared with the others at the school. She wasn't a member of the fencing club, but stopped by frequently to show support for Garyl.

"It's really cool how many different kinds of familiars you can summon!" said Garyl. "Did these dwarves come from a story too?"

"Quite right!" Snow Little confirmed. "These seven dwarves appear in a fairy tale from another world, as protectors of a princess. Lord Garyl, as my own body is too weak to wield a sword, I would like you to train them in my stead." With a delicate motion, she took Garyl's arm in her own.

"U-Um... Snow Little?" Garyl asked.

"W-Well, you see..." Snow Little explained. "Like this, you should be able to control my servants the same way I do. Now, Lord Garyl, the dwarves await your instruction." She pressed up even closer to Garyl's arm as she spoke, until her chest was squishing against him.

"Well, I do appreciate letting me use your dwarves..." said Garyl, smiling a little stiffly. "But I can do that without us sticking so close to each other, you know?" He pulled his arm away from Snow Little in favor of simply holding her hand.

Garyl, as it happened, was quite correct. The smallest amount of body contact was all that was needed to share control of the creatures summoned by the fable folk's power. It was wholly unnecessary for Snow Little to cling to Garyl's entire arm like that.

"I suppose that is true..." Snow Little admitted, sounding distinctly disappointed.

"No worries!" Garyl said with a knowing grin. "I'll train them properly for you. Here!" As he promised, the dwarves began a set of sword drills following Garyl's instructions.

As all this was happening, the advisor of the fencing club, Murasame, watched from across the room with her arms folded stoically in front of her chest. Murasame, who had descended from the oni people that originally hailed from the Land of the Rising Sun, was a woman of few words and an expert sword fighter. She had been making her living as a mercenary until she chanced upon a security job for the Houghtow College of Magic. Taclyde had scouted her on the spot, and hired her to be the college's fencing instructor.

Hmm... she thought. *Things seem the same as ever...* She stood with her sword stowed in the sheath on her belt, neither moving the slightest muscle nor speaking a single word as she watched over the arena.

There was an audience in attendance as well, watching from the spectator's seats on the arena's second floor. Most of them were either female students or residents of Houghtow City—ninety percent female as well—who had shown up for the chance to watch Garyl in action. The Houghtow College of Magic had opened its campus to the public that day in order to spread word of its latest developments, and many of the women living in town had leaped at the opportunity to see Garyl in the flesh after all the rumors they had heard about his breathtakingly good looks. Between them and the girls who already attended the school, the stands were packed full with spectators.

Many of the women watching hissed in complaint at the sight of Garyl holding Snow Little's hand.

"What does that girl think she's doing?"

"Lord Garyl's hand should belong to me!"

"She is a little cute I suppose, but... Ohhh! It makes me so mad!"

A girl seated at the very end of the back row, meanwhile, sighed in exasperation as she watched. "I came all this way from the capital because my uncle, Commander MacTaulo, told me I could find an excellent swordsman here. But I suppose my trip was wasted..." *I'd heard so much about that boy Garyl,* she thought, *but all he's doing is doting on all these girls and helping them with their own sword technique. I haven't seen him make a single move himself! And that instructor...Murasame, was it? There's no sign that she actually does any teaching here. Well, I suppose this is the best you can expect from a school in the middle of nowhere...*

Sighing once more, the girl stood up from her seat, her blonde pigtails bobbing as she made her way for the exit.

Flio and Rys appeared in the stands just as the girl was making her leave. “It looks like they’re still waiting to get started,” Flio observed.

“Excellent!” said Rys as the pair made their way to an empty seat in the stands. “I would hate to come all this way only to miss Garyl’s mock battle with the fencing club advisor!”

The girl with the pigtails, alas, was already long gone.

◇Houghtow City—Blossom Acres◇

Flio’s house stood some ways outside the walls of Houghtow City. He had originally purchased the dwelling after it had been abandoned by its former residents in the wake of an attack by magic beasts sent by the Dark Army. At the time it had been a modest single-story house, the perfect size for Flio and Rys alone, but Flio had expanded the building as the house’s population swelled far beyond the initial two. By now it had become a luxurious four-story estate featuring an underground basement. In front of the house was a large pasture for equine magic beasts and demon horses, which Sleip and Byleri operated as husband and wife, and farther past that lay an enormous swath of farmland that Blossom managed.

“Clear blue skies again today!” Blossom declared, wiping the sweat off her brow as she looked up at the sky. “Perfect weather for a bit of farmwork!”

When Flio had first met Blossom, she’d been a heavy armor knight in a company from Klyrode Castle, but when her best friend Balirossa left the knighthood, she followed her to come lodge at Flio’s house. Blossom’s family were farmers, so she was skilled in all manner of agricultural techniques, and since moving she had established a farm outside of the estate.

“Shall I deliver these crops to the Fli-o’-Rys General store, then?” Balirossa asked, looking up from her work packing baskets of fresh vegetables into the back of a wagon. After quitting the knighthood and moving in with Flio, Balirossa had begun working at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She had since become one of Ghozal’s two wives and the mother of his son Ghoro.

“That’s right!” said Blossom. “I’ll leave it to you then! Thanks to all of your help, our veggies have been selling like hotcakes!"

"Of course!" responded Balirossa. "After all, Sir Ghozal tells me this farm's produce has become quite well-known in the capital and neighboring cities as well as Houghtow!"

"Ehe!" Blossom smiled happily. "Well, that's darn good to hear! There ain't nothing sweeter to a farmer than hearing how much people love the veggies you grew with your own heart and soul!"

"Incidentally, Blossom, may I ask a question?"

"Hm? What is it, Balirossa?"

"Would you perhaps care to join me for sword training from time to time?" Balirossa asked. "I'm afraid you've been so busy lately with work on the farm that you haven't been able to practice."

"Ah ha ha!" Blossom laughed. "That doesn't bother me in the slightest!" she said, holding aloft her hoe with a grin on her face. "This baby right here right suits me much better than a sword!"

So she says... Balirossa thought. *But she defeated a dragon with that very hoe, granting her the title of Dragon Slayer and everything...*

Back when Balirossa and her companions had first begun living with Flio, Uliminas once led the Dark Army's legion of dragons to attack Flio's house in an attempt to gauge the extent of the man's power, only to be handily driven off. At the time, Blossom had thrown her hoe after the fleeing dragons as a joke, but Flio imbued it with enchantment magic in midair, causing the farming implement to succeed in its attack and earning Blossom the title of Dragon Slayer.

If only I had acted more quickly! Then perhaps I too would have become a Dragon Slayer... Balirossa lamented, bitter tears coming to her eyes as she remembered the events of that day.

"Hm?" said Blossom. "Something the matter, Balirossa?"

"N-No, nothing!" Balirossa insisted, quickly wiping away her tears before Blossom could notice she had been crying. "Nothing at all..." She went back to packing the wagon with baskets of vegetables, moving just a little too quickly.

"Well, what's that about?" Blossom wondered aloud, watching her friend work from behind. "That Balirossa can be a strange one, all right."

"*Gwowr!*" said Sybe, stepping up next to Blossom. Sybe was a wild psychobear Flio had once met in a random encounter. Sensing he had no hope of victory against Flio, however, Sybe had surrendered immediately. Ever since, he lived as Flio's household pet. He spent most of his time magically transformed into a unicorn rabbit thanks to one of Flio's spells—a much less obtrusive magic beast. Now, however, he was in his full psychobear glory, wide-brimmed straw hat on his head and basket on his back.

"You finished harvesting the vegetables from the inner fields, Sybe?" Blossom asked.

"*Gworf!*" Sybe gave his chest a hearty smack, looking quite pleased with himself.

"You really are one hell of a worker, Sybe!" Blossom declared. "The harvest is coming along nicely, thanks to you! Now, how about handing 'em over to Balirossa!"

"*Gworowf!*" Sybe nodded, lumbering his way over to Balirossa. Following along after him came the unicorn rabbit Shebe, carrying her own, much smaller basket.

Shebe was a wild unicorn rabbit who had taken a fancy to Sybe and joined the household to be his unicorn rabbit wife. The pair's three children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, trailed after their mother. Between them, Sube and Sobe had bodies resembling unicorn rabbits, while Sebe looked more like a psychobear.

"Ah ha ha!" Blossom laughed, cheerfully waving to Shebe and the rest of the family. "You're all helping out, I see! Thanks a billion!"

"*Snuffle!*" said Shebe.

"*Snuffle!*" answered Sube.

"*Gworf!*" came Sebe's reply.

"*Snuffle!*" added Sobe, each bowing in order as they greeted Blossom.

"So polite and hard working! Just like your dad!" Blossom said, watching with a smile as Sybe began helping Balirossa load the wagon. "*This* one, on the other hand..." she added, a crease furrowing in her brow as she turned to look behind her, catching a glimpse of a large straw between the rows of vegetables in a nearby field. It had been several hours, and the hat had not changed positions in the slightest. "Hey, Telbyress!" she called out to the hat in a somewhat exasperated voice. "How long do you plan on sitting on your butt?"

Suddenly, a goblin popped his head out of the fields a short distance away. He must have heard Blossom shouting. "Ngh! That wretched no-gooddess!" he grumbled. "Is she slacking off *again*?!"

He ran over towards the straw hat, resting the sickle he had been using to harvest crops on his shoulder.

This goblin was Hokh'hokton, a former soldier in the Dark Army who had found employment at Blossom Acres, spending his days working in the fields. The one he called "no-gooddess" was the fallen goddess Telbyress. Since she had been exiled from the Celestial Plane, she moved into Hokh'hokton's quarters, much to the latter's dismay...

Hokh'hokton dashed over with enough force to ruin the earthen ridges between the rows of crops, making a tremendous sound, but the person in the straw hat made no sign of moving whatsoever. "Still slacking off whenever you get the slightest opportunity, I see! You really are a bad-natured one, aren't you...?" Sighing, he reached out for the straw hat only for a gust of wind to carry it away, sending it floating ever so slowly down to the ground. Where the hat had been lay nothing but a hoe stuck upright in the earth. With the hat resting on top it had looked from a distance like Telbyress working in the fields, but it seemed she was in fact nowhere in sight.

Hokh'hokton picked up the hat and clenched it tight in his hand. "Damn that no-gooddess!" he declared through gritted teeth. "She's sneaked off somewhere again to get out of work! Lady Blossom!" he added, turning towards Blossom and bowing deep in apology. "This is due to my failure of supervision! I intend to take full responsibility and find this no-gooddess of ours, if you will grant me permission to leave my post for a short time!"

"R-Right, sure!" Blossom nodded, smirking to herself at Hokh'hokton's behavior.

"No-gooddess!" Hokh'hokton shouted, dashing off deeper into the fields, still holding Telbyress's straw hat tight. "Today is the last straw, I tell you! You'll have one fewer side dish with dinner tonight! And no accompanying drink! Now where did you go, damn you?! No-gooddess!!!"

"For all he says, he looks after her pretty well, that Hokh'hokton..." Blossom said, frowning as she watched him go. "He'd be well within his rights to kick her out, but he's been letting her use his room, even giving her food. But is that woman really a goddess from the Celestial Plane? Somehow I just can't see it..."

"She does nothing but slack off at work, and she does nothing but drink and sleep when she's off duty..." Balirossa agreed, furrowing her brow and lowering her head.

"Well, even Hiya said she was a goddess, so I suppose it must be true," Blossom said, scratching the back of her head. "I suppose the goddesses of the Celestial Plane come in all types, just like how there were all sorts of people serving with us as knights..."

"I suppose that makes sense, when you put it that way." Balirossa nodded, apparently satisfied. "Although, speaking of Hiya, they told me the other day about some evil rumors coming from the frontier..."

"Oh, you mean *those* rumors?" Blossom asked. "Those guys who were hiring people using counterfeit money?"

"That's right. Apparently there's a suspicious group using counterfeit money to trick mercenaries who lost their jobs now that the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army are at peace. It seems quite a number of people have been harmed already."

"What a thing to do..." Blossom sighed, grimacing. "I suppose there's gonna be folks doing wicked things like that no matter how much the world changes. But, well, mercenaries gonna mercenary. They'd be much better off working here at Blossom Acres—we'd give places to stay and three meals a day on top of their pay, and we never have enough help. Why, I'd even hire a cat if one showed up looking for a job! I sure could use a helping paw around here!" Suddenly, Blossom felt a number of paws pressing against her back. "Hm?" she said, looking behind her to see Sybe and the rest of his family.

"*Gwowrf!*"

"*Snuffle!*"

The assorted critters nodded with conviction, apparently able to understand Blossom's words. They seemed to be saying, "*We'll help too!*"

"Ah ha ha!" Blossom laughed. "Thanks, you guys! A paw from you is always a big help! How 'bout I treat you to a good meal once we're done here?"

Sybe's family cried out happily.

"In that case, let's get this harvest to Fli-o'-Rys!" Blossom said, boarding the driver's seat of the wagon, which was now fully stuffed with produce. "I have a feeling it's gonna be another big day at the market!"

As if on cue, Sybe moved to the front of the wagon and got ready to pull. Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, meanwhile, lined up behind the wagon and used their forelegs to give it a push for all they were worth.

Balirossa watched the magic beasts at work with a nod of appreciation. “Sybe and his family really are hard workers, aren’t they? If only Madame Telbyress would learn from their example...”

“Although I gotta say,” Blossom added, “if I ever saw that no-goddess of ours hard at work of her own accord, it would be pretty unsettling in its own way.”

“You are quite right, unfortunately,” said Balirossa, as the two shared a dark chuckle at Telbyress’s expense.

◇Meanwhile—The Foothills Outside Blossom Acres◇

“Huh?” muttered a woman, narrowing her eyes and glancing off in the direction of Blossom Acres as she sat on a rock in the foothills nearby. “Did I just hear a voice?”

This woman, of course, could only be Telbyress. Once a goddess of the Celestial Plane, Telbyress had neglected her divine work so disastrously that she had been exiled from the Celestial Plane itself. She invited herself into Hokh’hokton’s house where she stayed to this day, helping out at Blossom Acres. But between her love of alcohol and sheer natural laziness, she found herself spending her days always being scolded by Hokh’hokton for one thing or another.

“I swear,” she muttered to herself, “the people of thish world jus’ won’ give me the respect I desherve! I used to be a goddessh, you know! I was in charge of a whole entire world! I’m a higher being—way more important than shome angel!” With that, she drained the rest of the glass she had in her hand. “Pwahh!” she cried. “Burns goin’ down! Tha’s good shtuff...”

Telbyress took the bottle she had set down beside her in her arms and held it tight like a lover, nuzzling her cheeks against it with a thoroughly enchanted expression on her face.

“Butcha know,” she slurred, “I’ve gotten a bunch of my goddessh work done already... They’re not gonna punish me jus’ for takin’ it eashy on thish planetoid world for a li’l bit. Tha’s right! Thish is jus’ me rechargin’ my energy! Ish a preshent from my pasht self for workin’ so hard! Eh hee hee...”

This time, Telbyress took the bottle itself to her lips, draining the whole thing in one go. “Ngwah! Hic... Pwahhh!” she exclaimed, her smile growing more slovenly still. “Burnsh the throat! Long live liquor! Long live the fallen life!" she cried, toasting for all she was worth. "Ha ha hahh! Hokh'hokton may have taken away all the liquor I had hidden in my room, but I bet even *he'll* never think to look in a place like *thish*..."

As she spoke, Telbyress reached under the root of the great tree she was resting her back against. At a glance it looked like nothing was out of the ordinary, but when Telbyress withdrew her arm, she was holding a new fresh bottle in her hand. She had used her own magic to create a hidden liquor cabinet underneath an unassuming tree.

"Hee hee hee hee hee!" she laughed, her face red and her mouth slack from drunkenness. "Hokh'hokton'll jus' take it if I leave it in th' houshe, so I hid it here inshtead!"

Just then, Telbyress heard Hokh'hokton's voice once more—much closer than it had been last time. "Come out, you no-gooddess! Where are you, confound it?!"

"Hawawah?!" Telbyress exclaimed, jumping wide-eyed to her feet. Gone was the cheerful disposition she had had only a second ago. "O-Oh no! Thish is bad! Thish is very bad!" She rushed to return the bottles to their hiding place. "If Hokh'hokton findsh my liquor, he'll take aaall of it!" she said to herself before calling back. "Y-Yesh! Telbyressh ish right here! And shtop calling me a no-gooddesh!" Her arms flailing wildly, she ran as fast as she could in the direction of the voice.

"Hm?! So there you are, no-gooddess!" came Hokh'hokton's voice.

"I tooold you, shtop calling me a no-gooddessh!" Telbyress protested as she ran off, leaving behind the small hillock and the great tree she had converted into a hiding place for her liquor.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

As Flio and Rys were out visiting the Houghtow College of Magic, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was gearing up for another busy day. The city of Houghtow was located in the frontier of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, a great distance from the capital, but its remote location didn't seem to be doing anything to stem the flow of customers making their way into the shop.

"I'm telling you," one adventurer said to another as the two of them approached the front door. "This shop's got better stuff for sale than anywhere in the capital!"

"And with the Enchanted Frigate Station right next door, getting here is a snap!" the other agreed.

Indeed, the enormous ship—an Enchanted Frigate—flew above the adventurers' heads even as they spoke. The station outside the Fli-o'-Rys General Store had flights leading to every other station in service and accordingly saw even more traffic than the Enchanted Frigate Station in the capital of Klyrode Castle Town. Houghtow had become quite well-known for the sight of Enchanted Frigates in the sky overhead. No small number of tourists, in fact, had visited the city expressly to see the spectacle with their own eyes.

"Huh?" one of the adventurers said, stopping in his tracks as he stepped foot inside.

"What's wrong?" the other asked.

"I dunno..." he said, looking all around and cocking his head curiously. "Maybe it's just my imagination, but this place looks bigger on the inside..."

"Now that you mention it, it *does* kinda feel that way," his friend said. "But more importantly, let's hurry up and check out the weapons! I've heard the ones they have here are something else!"

"R-Right, good idea!" At his companion's urging, the man put aside his confusion and made his way to the weapons display.

Near the ceiling, watching the two men from above, was Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. Hiya possessed magic power sufficient to destroy the entire world of Klyrode if the whim took them, but ever since their defeat at Flio's hands, they had come to revere him as the so-called Exalted One and lived in his house with the rest of his family and assorted lodgers.

At present, Hiya was floating in midair, perfectly invisible, their arms folded and one hand resting on their chin. "Hmm..." they said as they surveyed the scene below. "I cast the spell Concealment to hide the spatial distortion inside the shop, but it seems I must hone myself further still if I am to achieve perfect mastery."

Just as Hiya said, the space inside the Fli-o'-Rys General Store had been expanded far beyond the original size of the building with an application of Hiya's own dimensional magic. Given the sheer number of customers coming daily to visit the shop, it was a necessary measure to prevent them from needing to place a limit on the number of people allowed inside at once.

"The Enchanted Frigate has certainly been a boon for business, but the magnificent items created by the Exalted One are the true reason for this shop's success," Hiya opined, nodding as they kept an eye on the store. "As his humble servant, I find myself ever in awe."

Suddenly, Hiya was startled out of their thoughts by the sound of a man's angry shouting. "What was that?!" he exclaimed over the noise of the shop. Hiya looked, and saw a large man standing in front of the register, taking out his temper on Uliminas, who was working customer service.

Uliminas the hellcat was Ghozal's closest confederate back when he had reigned as Dark One. She had accompanied him when he abdicated the throne, leaving the Dark Army behind. Now, disguised as a demihuman, she worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal's two wives and the mother of Folmina.

The large man on the other side of the register from Uliminas had selected a veritable heap of vegetables for purchase and set them on the counter next to the pouch of coins he intended to use to pay. "Shopkeep!" he bellowed. "*What* did you just say to me?!"

"I said, this meowney's no good!" Uliminas spat back, plucking a single coin from the man's bag and holding it out in front of his face. "It may be well-made, but I know a furgery when I see meowne!"

"Preposterous!" the man said, bringing his face right up to Uliminas's. "I earned that money through honest work!"

The man was nearly twice as large, but Uliminas didn't back down even a step as the man loomed close. She glared back fiercely. "I don't care *where* mew got it! Meow're not pulling the wool over *my* eyes!"

"What was that?!" the man demanded.

"Mew heard me!" Uliminas answered.

Uliminas and the giant man glared each other down, their faces inches apart. The shop had gone silent—it seemed like a fight could break out at any moment. And then a man's voice came from the space behind Uliminas, cutting through the perilous atmosphere. "Well, I was wondering who it was!" said Ghozal, sticking his head out of the back room. "If it isn't Ura!"

"Nh!" the man cried in surprise.

Ghozal had ruled over demonkind as the Dark One Gholl until the day he surrendered his throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and took on a human form to go live as a freeloader at Flio's house. During their time living together, Ghozal and Flio had come to be something like best friends. He had also taken two wives since moving in: Uliminas, who had been by his side during his days in the Dark Army, and Balirossa, a swordswoman and former knight.

Even in his human form, Ghozal was enormous—just about as big as the man who had been squabbling with Uliminas. The man, who Ghozal had called Ura, stared at his face for a short while before suddenly breaking out in a wide grin. "Well, what do you know!" he said cheerily, stepping forward to meet Ghozal. "I didn't recognize you at first in that human form of yours! It's Lord Gholl, is it not?"

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed merrily. "It's been quite some time! Glad to see you're still kicking!"

"I am most pleased to see you in good health as well, Lord Gholl!" said Ura.

"I'm going by Ghozal these days," Ghozal told him. "I'd appreciate it if you used that name for me from now on."

The two chatted on for a while, interspersed with loud bouts of laughter. Then, Sleip stepped out from the back room behind Ghozal. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "It can't be Ura!"

Sleip had been one of the Dark Army's Infernal Four until he left the Dark Army during Yuigarde's reign. Now, he spent his days looking after the equine magic beasts in Byleri's pasture. He and Byleri were as good as married, even though they'd never had a ceremony. The two of them had a daughter named Rislei, who Sleip doted on endlessly.

"Oh!" said Ura, the two men sharing a joyful embrace. "You're here as well, Lord Sleip! Never would I have imagined we would meet again in a place like this!"

"Like, is this a friend of yours, Lord Sleip?" asked Byleri, appearing behind the two from the corridor that led deeper into the shop. Byleri had originally been an archer with Balirossa's knightly company from Klyrode Castle. When the four knights all quit, Byleri began using her prodigious skill for handling horses to look after equine magic beasts from the surrounding area. These days, she lived a blissful life with her common-law husband Sleip and their daughter Byleri.

"And what have we here?" Ura asked. "Lord Sleip, is this human woman an acquaintance of yours?"

"Yes, I suppose I should introduce you," said Sleip. "This is my wife Byleri, the mother of Rislei, my darling daughter."

"Well now, Lord Sleip!" Ura exclaimed, unable to keep from letting out a boisterous laugh. "Newly married and already a father! What joyous news!" Then, stepping up to Byleri and bowing gravely, he added, "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, wife of Lord Sleip. I am Ura, of the oni—"

"A moment, Mister Ura." Suddenly, Hiya manifested corporeally in the room, cutting Ura off. "This shop is still in business," they said. "If you wish to reminisce, perhaps you could make use of the back rooms to discuss old times at your leisure?" By this point Hiya had heard enough to understand that Ura was a friend of Ghozal and Sleip's from their time in the Dark Army. Their goal now was to keep the reunion from interfering with the shop's other customers.

"Hrm," said Ghozal, understanding Hiya's concern. "Fair enough. Let's talk in the back." He led Ura deeper into the shop.

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Ghozal, Uliminas, Sleip, and Byleri took Ura to the visitors' room in the back of the shop, leaving Hiya behind to look after the register.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly," Ura said, bowing politely to Byleri. "I am Ura of the oni people. I once fought alongside Lord Ghozal and Lord Sleip as a member of the Dark Army."

"Oh!" said Byleri, returning Ura's bow so deeply that her head practically touched her knees. "Y-Yes! Like, thank you very much for such a polite introduction! I'm Byleri, Lord Sleip's wife!"

Uliminas, who was sitting in the chair next to Byleri, seemed surprised. "So, meowt's going on here?" she asked, frowning in confusion at the sight of the three demons acting like old friends. "Ghozal and Sleip, mew know this demeown?"

"Hrm. That's right," said Ghozal. "You didn't start working for me until after Ura and the two of us parted ways."

"Meow that I think about it, I *do* remember hearing mew used to have an oni subordinate..." Uliminas reflected.

"Ura had been around for about as long as Sleip," Ghozal explained. “They say he was good enough for the Infernal Four, but...”

“He fell head over heels for some woman and left the Dark Army, saying he was gonna spend his life with her instead.”

“Ha ha ha!” Ura said. “Ah, the foolishness of youth. And here I’d thought I’d heard the last of that whole affair!” Ghozal, Sleip, and Ura all shared a laugh at the memory.

“I do seem to remeowmber back when Hugi-Mugi the doppeladler was selected for the Infernal Four, hearing there was some kind of drama with a demeown who was supposed to get the position...” Uliminas said, smirking at the three of them.

“That’s right.” Ghozal nodded, a smile on his face. “That was Ura.”

It used to ruin Ghozal’s mewd if I so much as meowntioned that whole affur, so I never asked fur the details of what happened... Uliminas thought, a smile creeping onto her face at the sight of the three demons looking so happy to see each other once again. *I would have never imeowgined seeing everyone together like this back when we were in the Dark Army. It’s strange, but I can’t help thinking I like things better this way.*

“Um...” Byleri said, timidly raising her hand to speak. “Like, I’m glad everyone’s having such a good time...but what were you fighting about earlier?”

“Oh!” Ura exclaimed. “That’s right! I got distracted from the issue at hand! You, Uliminas! You said my money was fake!” He took out the sack of coins and slammed it loudly on the table, shouting angrily as if their fight had never been interrupted. “I earned this money working in a human kingdom to procure food for the people of my village! How dare you say it isn’t real?!”

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, taking one of the coins from the bag to examine it himself. Then, furrowing his brow, he placed a hand on the oni’s shoulder. “Ura, I understand how you feel. But calm down for a second, would you? I’m sure you worked for this money. You aren’t the sort of man who would lie about something like that. But Uliminas is right. These coins are counterfeit.”

“I-It can’t be...” said Ura, at a loss for words.

“It’s a well-made fake,” said Ghozal. “But...” He took the coin in both hands and snapped it in two. “The surface is only plated with silver. Inside, it’s just low-quality scrap ore.”

“I don’t believe it!” Ura gasped as everyone gathered around for a look at the broken coin.

There were three kinds of coins used as currency among the humans of Klyrode—gold, silver, and copper. Each kingdom had their own designs, but the weight of metal used was kept equivalent in order to preserve uniformity of value.

"You're right..." said Sleip. "The inside and outside look like they're made from different materials..."

"Unthinkable!" Ura declared. "They paid us with low-quality counterfeits!"

"Wow..." said Byleri. "That's, like, totally awful!"

It took Ura a while to recover his wits, but when he did, he turned back to face Uliminas and bowed his head low in genuine contrition. "Lady Uliminas... I must apologize for my earlier rudeness. I truly had no idea that I was in possession of counterfeit coins..."

"Well..." Uliminas said, smirking and shaking her head. "As long as mew understand, I suppose there's no harm done."

"Still..." Sleip started, inclining his head in puzzlement as Ura and Uliminas's argument came to a close. "Why's a mighty champion like yourself making shopping trips to buy vegetables? With your abilities, I'd expect you'd have no trouble finding some demon somewhere to take you in..."

"Ah, yes, well you see..." Ura began, wincing as he awkwardly scratched the back of his head. "I was living a quiet life in the mountains with my wife, out where nobody could bother us. That is...until my wife passed away." For a moment, a lonesome look passed across Ura's face. "My wife was one of the fairy folk, after all. I knew from the start that her life span wasn't going to be as long as mine. There wasn't anything I could have done. So I started working as a mercenary to earn money to raise the daughter we had together, hiding my identity the entire time. But lately, you know, the Dark Army has had that peace treaty with the humans..."

"Like, yeah, totally!" Byleri said, nodding along.

"Well, thanks to that, all the mercenary jobs up and vanished," Ura continued. "I thought maybe I could make a living hunting magic beasts, but the Adventurers' Guild in the town I went to was full of folk like me who had lost their jobs as mercenaries. I wasn't able to earn enough to make sure everyone in the village could eat their fill."

"Hrm?" Ghozal asked, cocking his head. "A village, you say?"

“Well, what do you know!” said Sleip. “Ura, you became a village chief? And here I thought you were more suited for being a one-man army.”

“Well, I can’t exactly say being a village chief suits my personality…” Ura said. “But I happened to meet a group of demons who’d turned to the evils of banditry when the peace treaty cost them their jobs. I started looking after them using the money I had on hand, hoping I might help them find a better way, but at some point word started to spread that I was offering food. I started taking more and more folks in, and before long, there were quite a number of us. Before I knew it, everyone had taken to calling the place Ura Village.”

“So,” Ghozal said, “you ended up looking after a whole village of demons who idolize you?”

“What other choice did they have?” Ura furrowed his brow. “Most of the folk at the village are low-level demons. They can’t control the malicium in their bodies, so they can’t work for humans, and they’d be taken advantage of for their weakness if they went to work for a demon. There’s no way they could expect to be paid a decent wage.”

“Hrm…” muttered Ghozal. “Why not petition the Dark One, then? There might be something he can do.”

“Excuse me?!” Ura’s eyes snapped open. “Don’t be absurd! Perhaps if *you* were still Dark One, Gholl, I might have considered the idea…but the current Dark One is that lout Yuigarde, isn’t he? I understand he’s changed his name to Dawkson now, but I would never expect any help from that tyrant! Yuigarde only believes in his own power! I once joined a Dark Army’s campaign of his as a mercenary, you know. He had us wandering around the desert with no plan whatsoever! I very nearly lost my life! Why would I go to an incompetent man like him?!”

The current Dark One Dawkson had led a campaign in the desert back when he was still using the name Yuigarde. Yuigarde marshaled the majority of the forces under his command in an effort to crush a rebellion led by the devil Zanzibar, but he refused to send proper scouting parties. Instead, his army wandered back and forth through the desert at random, guided by nothing more than Yuigarde’s whims. It would go down in the Dark Army’s history as a foolhardy effort that achieved nothing of note, instead driving the Dark Army itself to the precipice of total collapse.

Ura had gone red in the face, ranting furiously. He was a large man, even disguised in his human form, and quite loud as well. Ghozal, Sleip, and Uliminas were all demons themselves, and perfectly able to maintain their cool in the face of his tirade, but Byleri was a human, and her smile was starting to look very strained indeed.

Ahh... Byleri thought as she did her utmost not to let her smile falter. *I wonder if this is how Balirossa felt sitting next to Mister Ghozal before the two of them got married. Like, right now, I feel like I totally get it...*

Sleip, who had noticed Byleri was starting to feel overwhelmed, gently placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Ura, I certainly sympathize with your anger, but perhaps we should discuss what to do about this situation of yours?"

"O-Oh! Of course. My apologies." Ura lowered his head in apology. It seemed Sleip's words had returned him to his senses.

"So, mew came to our store to buy vegetables to take home to meowr village..." Uliminas confirmed. "But all of meowr meowny turned out to be fake. Mew won't be able to buy purrovisions with that, will mew..."

"Th-That's right..." said Ura. "I understand the situation, of course. But I worked so hard in those mines, all to buy food for everyone in the village. I suppose I could go looking for another job, but there aren't many places out there offering good wages to folk like myself who can't properly demonstrate their background..."

"But Ura," said Ghozal. "If this mine was offering huge sums of money to people of uncertain background, that seems suspicious in itself..."

"Ah...well..." Ura uttered, making a distinctly pained expression. "You are quite right, Lord Ghozal. And I mean to make no excuse. But I couldn't just let all those folk who look up to me starve..." Ura trailed off, uncertain what else to say.

Just then, there came a polite knock on the door. "Excuse me," said Flio, stepping inside, followed by Rys and Blossom. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"And...who would you be?" Ura asked.

"Oh, my apologies," said Flio. "My name is Flio. I'm the proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store."

"What?! Then, you run this shop?!" Ura sprung up from his seat and bowed his head towards Flio. "I-I'm not sure what I should say... It might have been out of ignorance, but I still attempted to purchase merchandise from your store using counterfeit currency..."

"I understand," said Flio, giving Ura one of his usual easygoing smiles. "Hiya told me what happened at the register."

Rys, meanwhile, stood to her husband's right, folding her arms and glaring at Ura with an expression of clear displeasure. "Unbelievable," she declared. "Using counterfeit coins at my lord husband's shop. I believe a bit of punishment is in order for your misdeeds..." Her fingertips transformed into bestial claws as she spoke, the air around her practically sparking with palpable danger.

Blossom, who had come in after Rys, stepped in front of her and began waving her arms frantically. "N-Now, now, Lady Rys! This oni fellow apologized properly and everything, didn't he? Th-There's no need for all that, is there?" Her forehead had broken out in a cold sweat in the face of Rys's obvious rage, but she kept a smile on her face as she spoke, doing her best to brighten the atmosphere of the room.

"So, Mister Ura," Flio said, unable to keep from smiling in amusement at Blossom and Rys. "I hear you were planning to buy food at our shop to take back to the people of your village."

"O-Oh! Yes, that's right," Ura said. "After all, everyone says your vegetables are top quality, and reasonably priced as well. And I have to say, now that I've seen your goods for myself, the rumors were no exaggeration! If there's any way I could still purchase some to take home with me, I would very much appreciate it. How about it, Lord Flio? Is there some work I could perhaps do for your shop? Lord Ghozal and Lord Sleip here can vouch for me, I'm sure—if there's any heavy lifting you need done, I'm certain I can be of use to you!" Ura flexed with both arms, showing off the musculature of his well-built upper body.

Rys sighed quietly at Ura's display. "We have quite enough people for heavy lifting, between the former Silent Listeners and Sleip's former elite demon horse guard..." she explained. "I understand you have your circumstances, of course, and I'd love to be able to help, but I'm not certain we can..." Rys wasn't without sympathy for Ura's goal of providing food for the people of his village, but she was still seething with indignation that someone would dare to use counterfeit currency at her husband's shop. The look on her face was conflicted indeed.

"E-Erm..." Blossom timidly raised her hand to speak. "Lady Rys? Lord Flio?"

"What is it, Blossom?" Flio asked.

"Well, it's just, I suppose I have a bit of a suggestion..." Blossom ventured. "Why don't we have Mister Ura come and work over at my farm?"

"You want him for your farm?" Flio asked.

"Yes, well, you know..." Blossom began. "With the Enchanted Frigates, we can sell our goods in way more markets, and it seems like people like our vegetables a fair bit. I was thinking of clearing some land to try and increase our production, but we've been just a bit short-handed..."

"Oh?" No sooner had the words left Blossom's mouth than Damalynas abruptly appeared in the middle of the room, floating in midair and looking down at Blossom with folded arms. "I must say, I'm surprised to hear you've found yourself in want of help. Surely Their Divinity Hiya, or Maglion, or even I myself could handle harvesting vegetables or clearing fields with our magic?"

Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, was a sorceress who had achieved the highest mastery of the art of dark magic. Her body, however, was no longer flesh and blood; rather, it was a psychic construct. She had been vanquished by Hiya, who brought her into their mindscape—their own mental world—to serve as the djinn's beloved training partner.

"Ah, well, I appreciate the offer, honest!" said Blossom, wincing apologetically and scratching the back of her head. "And people really like the experimental magical vegetables y'all've been growing in that corner of the farm. I think it's real incredible that you can do all that with your spells, and I'm glad y'all keep offering to use your magic to help out with my farm..." Blossom corrected her posture and looked up at Damalynas with a serious expression. "But I really would like the work on my farm to be done by hand. As a human and a farm girl, y'know?" she added with a grin.

"Hmm..." Flio said out loud to himself. "But didn't Blossom originally want to be a knight of the Magical Kingdom...?"

"Ah, well, that was that and this is this, y'know?" said Blossom, once again wincing and scratching the back of her head. "B-But that aside, if you aren't afraid of a bit of hard work, I'd love to have you for the farm! And lucky for you, it sounds like you're already a fan of our veggies! If you work for us, we'll pay you a good salary as well as room and board. Whaddaya say?"

Ura's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "I don't know *what* to say! What a gracious offer!" The oni ran over to Blossom, taking her hand in both of his and squeezing it tight. "I had never even hoped for such kindness! I would be most pleased, if you would have me!"

"Well, I'm pleased to see you so pleased!" said Blossom, shaking his hand with a grin. "But speaking of, why don't we bring the people of your village down to work on the farm too? They'll get a salary and room and board too, of course!"

"T-Truly, a most gracious offer..." Ura said, although his expression darkened visibly. "But I'm afraid that many of the demons of our village are unable to control their malicium..."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about malicium," Flio said, his smile as easygoing as ever.

"N-No need?!" Ura exclaimed, his eyes going wide once again.

Flio held out his right hand. In it was a magic gem that shone with a pale blue light. "This magic gem has an effect that neutralizes malicium in the area," he explained. "This way, any malicium your demons emit will be instantly rendered harmless."

"I-I-I-Incredible!" Ura balked. "Y-Y-Y-You sell such things at your store, then?"

"It's something an acquaintance asked me to look into developing," Flio said. "We only recently finished creating a practical version. If you don't mind, moving your village next to Blossom Acres would be a great opportunity to test its capabilities as well."

"I see!" said Ura. "If you have such a thing, I would gladly make use of it! And if the village folk can work at Lady Blossom's farm, I won't have to leave the village to work for long stretches anymore!" Ura had already begun walking quickly out of the visitors' room. "And now that that's settled, let's strike while the iron's hot! I'll return to my village straightaway, and get everything ready to—"

"Oh, Mister Ura, wait a moment," said Flio, stopping him before he could leave the room.

"Yes? What is it, Lord Flio?" Ura asked.

"Excuse me for one second," Flio said, placing his index finger on Ura's forehead. His finger shone with light, a sign that he had begun casting a spell. "I see. Your village is at the eastern end of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, near the summit of a small mountain deep in the forest…”

“Wh-What?!” Ura said, stunned. “Y-Yes, that is correct, but…you were able to find that out with your magic, Lord Flio?”

“So I was. I have a certain amount of skill at magic, as it happens,” Flio said, his easygoing smile unfaltering as he continued. “The whole area around the mountain is shrouded in malicium to keep magic beasts from drawing close, I see…”

“That’s right,” Ura confirmed. “But that also means that while I’m away, the people there have nothing to eat but field greens. I was able to earn a fair bit of money as a mercenary until recently, at least…”

“It looks like there are some fifty people living in the village, all told,” Flio said. “Should I bring all of them over?”

“Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem,” said Ura. “I’ve talked with everyone before, and they said they wouldn’t mind moving as long as they had enough land to live on.”

“I see…” Flio muttered. “In that case…” He recited a short incantation. Ura didn’t recognize the spell Flio had cast and cocked his head, puzzled. Seconds passed. “Okay,” said Flio, giving the confused oni another of his familiar smiles. “Everyone’s moved in. It looks like they had houses already, so I just moved the entire mountain on over!”

“Huh?” Ura froze, his eyes open wide in shock. *Wh-What is this man saying?!* he thought, his mind racing. *Everyone’s moved in?! If he really cast a spell just now to move the entire mountain from all the way over here, shouldn’t it take a huge magic circle and a long, flashy incantation?!*

Flio, however, just kept smiling like always.

◇Meanwhile—Flio’s House◇

Tucked away in one corner of the vast fields of Blossom Acres that stood outside Flio’s residence was a tea orchard run by Tia—a magic doll originally created by a mage who served in the Dark Army long ago. Calsi’im had discovered her in her ruined state and rescued her, restoring her to working condition. She had accompanied him ever since and currently resided together in Flio’s house. At that moment, Tia was in her orchard wearing a black gothic lolita dress, basket full of tea leaves in hand and a cheerful smile on her face.

“Thank you so very much for helping harvest the tea leaves again today, Calsi’im!” she called.

“Of course!” said the old skeleton, poking his head out from behind a nearby tea tree. “I’m glad to help, for the sake of your delicious tea!” He laughed joyfully, his jawbone rattling against his skull.

Calsi’im was a skeleton warrior who had ruled the Dark Army for a brief time as Dark Regent, a stint of service that ended with his death. He had been resurrected by Flio’s hand, however, and now resided with the others at Flio’s house.

“To hear you say such a thing is the greatest joy I could possibly imagine,” Tia said, smiling and bowing deeply.

“Of course, of course!” Calsi’im said, his jawbone rattling all the while as he stepped up beside her. “And hearing you say *that* makes me a very happy skeleton indeed!”

Just then, Calsi’im and Tia’s daughter Rabbitz came leaping in their direction, a great big smile on her face. “Papa! Mama!” she cried.

As the daughter of a skeleton and a magic doll, Rabbitz was an exceptionally rare sort of being. She always wore a smile on her face, and her favorite thing to do in the world was climbing atop her father Calsi’im’s head.

“Oho! Rabbitz!” said Calsi’im. “Have you been a good girl and — Gawaah!” Calsi’im’s speech was interrupted when Rabbitz, hopping around on all fours like a genuine bunny, leaped straight onto his grinning face, draping herself over the back of his head and rubbing her cheeks against him.

“Now, Rabbitz,” Tia said, frowning as she placed her hands on her daughter’s back. “Haven’t I told you that you must stop clinging to Calsi’im’s head like this? We wouldn’t want his skull to come off again, would we...?”

Rabbitz, however, turned to face Tia with a cheerful grin. “Mama! A mountain! A mountain!” she cried happily, pointing at something behind the magic doll.

“A mountain?” Tia asked, a dubious look on her face. “Why, whatever do you mean? There’s only a small hill there, I believe...” but as she turned to look, her eyes went wide and she froze on the spot. “E-Excuse me...Calsi’im?”

“Yes? Wh-What is it, Tia my dear?”

“Is there really a mountain outside the tea plantation, do you suppose...?”

“A mountain?” Calsi’im asked, managing to shift Rabbitz around to the back of his skull so he could see what was happening. He looked in the direction his daughter was pointing, but instead of the familiar hill, there stood a small mountain he had never seen before, towering over them like an enshrined deity. This was the very mountain Flio had transported using his earlier spell, atop which stood Ura’s village. Ordinarily, a spell like that would have required an enormous magic circle and a long incantation even for the highest level of practitioners, but Flio had achieved the feat with only a few short words.

“Well, that does seem to be a mountain!” Calsi’im confirmed.

“Yes...” Tia agreed. “It really is a mountain...”

“A mountain! A mountain!” Rabbitz chanted.

With no way of knowing what was going on, Calsi’im, Tia, and Rabbitz could only gawk at the mountain that had appeared out of nowhere.

◇The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—Throne Room◇

“I see... so that is the state of things.” The Maiden Queen of Klyrode sighed softly as her agent finished their report, kneeling on the ground before her as she sat on the throne.

The Maiden Queen was the reigning sovereign of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her full name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but her friends knew her as Ellie. She had taken reign of the kingdom when her father, the former King, was exiled for his many misdeeds. She was a woman in her thirties, but so devoted to politics that she had never so much as had a boyfriend.

“Then this group has been secretly excavating rare minerals—minerals so rare they are not to be mined without the express permission of the crown—and selling the ore through unlawful routes,” the Maiden Queen repeated. “And using counterfeit coins to operate their business, no less...”

“I swear...” the Third Princess said, puffing out her cheeks in an angry pout in her seat to the Maiden Queen’s right. “I thought we had earned a reprieve when we signed that peace treaty with the Dark Army, but now we must contend with counterfeiting? How dare they, after my sister the Queen and all of her assistants worked so hard to bring peace to Klyrode!”

The Third Princess, Swann Klyrode, was the Maiden Queen's younger sister. She had graduated from a noble academy out of a desire to serve as the Maiden Queen's right hand, and had quickly become an indispensable advisor. Her chief duties were in the Magical Kingdom's internal affairs. If she had a flaw, it was the overbearing infatuation she had for her sister.

"It must be the local nobility, turned to unscrupulous business now that they can no longer make their fortunes in war! We must investigate them immediately!" The Third Princess bundled up her skirt in her hands to prevent it from flying everywhere as she ran. She appeared to be prepared to bolt out of the throne room at a moment's notice.

"Wait a minute, Third Princess," said the Second Princess, who was seated to the Maiden Queen's left.

The Second Princess was the middle of the three sisters. Her name was Leusoc Klyrode, and like her younger sister the Third Princess, she served as one of the Maiden Queen's arms. She had been dealing in diplomacy since the days when the old King Klyrode was on the throne and they were still at war with the Dark Army, and was well used to negotiations with the other human nations.

"What is it, my sister the Second Princess?" the Third Princess asked. "Would it not be most effective for us to begin gathering information as soon as we can so we can work to counteract this immediately?"

"I don't disagree," the Second Princess said with a heavy sigh, "but wait a minute, okay?" She stepped between the Third Princess and the Maiden Queen. "You know, if nobility from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode were behind this, all we would have to do is send in the knights, and that would be that. But I don't think this is gonna be that simple..."

"What do you mean by that, Second Princess?" the Maiden Queen asked, her expression grave.

"This is still unconfirmed," the Second Princess began, "but I have reason to believe that our counterfeiters are involved with another kingdom altogether."

"Y-You can't mean...!" the Third Princess exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

"And given that situation, we must avoid making rash moves. If we cast suspicion on a foreign kingdom without adequate proof of our claims, they may simply refuse to even speak with us."

"Kh!" The Third Princess stomped her feet in aggravation. "How vexing!"

"Calm yourself, Third Princess," the Maiden Queen said in a level voice. "No doubt, you are correct to say that we must act with haste. However, as the Second Princess says, if other nations are involved, a careless move on our part could result in conflict between our lands. It would not do for us to sully our hard won peace with the Dark Army by sparking a needless war. We must learn everything we can first before we begin devising our countermeasures." With quiet grace, she rose from the throne as she spoke. "First, I will pay a visit to our collaborators and discuss with them what to do."

"Please give them my regards," the Third Princess said, curtsying elegantly.

"Yes," said the Second Princess, bowing her head. "And deliver my regards to our collaborators' eldest son, as well."

At those words, the Maiden Queen's serene face suddenly turned bright red.

It was an open secret among many in the castle that the Maiden Queen regularly visited Flio to discuss matters of the state, as was the fact that she and Flio's son Garyl were lovers.

"My sister the Queen?" the Third Princess asked, frowning in confusion. "What does she mean, your collaborators' eldest son?"

"N-Nothing whatsoever!" the Maiden Queen said, blurting out the words a little too fast before darting out of the throne room.

The Second Princess watched her sister go, a mischievous smile on her face. *My older sister has always had to bear the weight of governing the kingdom alone, thanks to our father's criminal deeds,* she thought. *It's a relief to see she's finally found a decent guy. And personally, as the designated diplomat, I'm just hoping they'll get engaged and married as soon as possible so I can stop dealing with all of the princelings hoping for an interview...*

"Excuse me, my sister the Second Princess?" the Third Princess asked. "What did you mean by your words earlier? Who is this 'eldest son,' exactly?"

"Don't worry," the Second Princess said. "I'll tell you all about it when you're just a bit older."

"What?!" The Third Princess pouted. "That's not fair! I graduated from the Knight Academy, you know! I'm a proper grown-up, and I'm tired of you treating me like a child!"

"Ah ha ha!" the Second Princess laughed, grinning in amusement at her little sister's red-faced anger. "Oh, don't be silly!"

The two kept arguing, but the Maiden Queen herself had already left the throne room.

◇In a Forest◇

In a forest somewhere in the world, a solitary carriage rolled down a lonesome road. You *could* call it a road if you wanted anyway—it didn't look like the rugged path saw much in the way of traffic at all. At a glance, it was hard to tell it was even there.

Inside the carriage, Hero Gold-Hair was laughing merrily with his companions. "I tell you, it's good to have some decent paying work for a change, isn't it?" he said.

"I knooow!" Tsuya agreed, a great big smile on her face as she adoringly rubbed her cheek against a pouch stuffed full of coins. "The client must be reeeally nice to give us thiiis much money just to carry some luuuggage! But I dooo wonder why they wouldn't tell us who they weeere..."

"Well, they paid us half the money upfront anyway, so we don't need to worry about getting stiffed like last time," Hero Gold-Hair said. "In fact, since we have all this money, I say we use it to treat ourselves to some proper food tonight!"

"I quite agree!" opined Valentine, smiling jubilantly from her seat across Hero Gold-Hair. "With such a sizable advance payment, surely no harm will come from a single night of luxurious dining!" Tsuya nodded along enthusiastically.

Wuha Gappoli, for her part, seemed no less excited from where she sat with her arms folded behind her head as she cheerfully kicked her legs. "Eee hee hee!" she cackled. "I can't wait! Tonight we're gonna go all out!"

"All right," Hero Gold-Hair confirmed, glancing over the party over his folded arms. "Riliangiu will be back from scouting before long. After that, we'll find the nearest town and go all out with the food and drinks."

"Hooray for Hero Gold-Haaair!" cheered Tsuya.

"He's so understanding!" gushed Valentine.

"*I would quite like to let loose for a single night as well!*" the voice of Aryun Keats, who was at that moment transformed and serving as the party's means of transportation, echoed throughout the carriage.

Tsuya gave the group a cheerful smile, but beneath her carefree exterior she was already busy calculating the most economical plan for the group's night on the town.

Ummm... L-Let me seeee... she thought. *Fiiirst we should have them bring out looots of cheap food to fill everyone's stomaaachs...but we should start with the expeeensive alcohol and switch to the cheeeap drinks once everyone seems druuunk. We miiight have to pad it out with some waaater too... Anything to save a bit of moooney...* She tightened her grip on the bag of coins. *I knooow this job is paying a fair bit of money, but we caaan't expect it to be around foreeever! We haaave to build up some saaavings while we can! After all, Hero Gooold-Hair put meee in charge of the finances! I have to do this...*

"*But I must say,*" Aryun Keats opined, interrupting Tsuya's thoughts. "*I understand the client specified we were to use this road, but it really is rough going...*"

"It is..." Hero Gold-Hair agreed. "I wonder if this road's been abandoned or some such..."

"*I wonder if it ever saw much use to begin with,*" said Aryun Keats. "*It seems to be so disused that it's become little more than an animal path. I suppose we should be grateful for it, however, if it will enable us to avoid inspection...*"

"True enough..." Hero Gold-Hair grumbled, folding his arms over his chest. "Unfortunately, I am still a wanted criminal in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode." He lowered his head in thought for a moment. "Well, there's no denying that it's strange, but Riliangiu's still off doing her advance scouting and hasn't reported any emergencies yet. I say we keep on down the path."

"*Aye aye, Hero Gold-Hair!*" Aryun Keats replied in high spirits.

"Hey, now!" said Wuha Gappoli. "If the client instructed us to use this road, what's the use fretting about it? More importantly, let's hurry on to town! I can just about taste it...the fragrant liquor...the succulent food...!"

"Well said, Wuha! I quite agree!" Valentine said, embracing Wuha as the two laughed in jubilation.

Hmm... Hero Gold-Hair thought, his arms stubbornly folded in thought as he sat in his seat. *I can't say this whole situation sits quite right with my intuition... What to do...?*

Aryun Keats continued through the forest in her carriage form as the conversation inside carried on and on.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

In the throne room on the second floor of the Dark Citadel, the Dark One Dawkson—ostensibly the master of the grand building itself—sat as he always did, on the ground in front of his throne. His minion Phufun stood to the side.

"Excuse me..." Phufun said, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose. "My master?"

"Huh?" Dawkson asked. "What's up, Phufun?"

"Please forgive my boldness, Master, but I must speak..." Phufun began. "I understand that you still refuse to sit on the throne, saying you are yet unworthy of the position of Dark One. It is a worthy sentiment, I suppose, not to let your recent success go too much to your head. However, since the peace treaty you forged with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, you have been doing admirably in reestablishing harmonious relationships between demons who live within your territory. I do not imagine any would object if you were to take your rightful seat." Having said her piece, she adjusted her glasses once again.

Dawkson glanced in Phufun's direction and sighed ever so slightly. "Thank you for sayin' so," he said. "But you're wrong. There is someone who'd object—me myself."

"But—" Phufun protested.

"Thank you for sayin' so," Dawkson repeated. "Really. But let's leave that topic there and get on with the daily reports."

"Y-Yes, Master," Phufun said with a bow before turning her attention back to the papers in her hand. "I have a report from Lord Zanzibar of the Infernal Four, detailing unsavory rumors spreading among your domain."

"Unsavory rumors, huh?"

"Yes. It seems that someone in the hinterlands has been employing demons and paying them in counterfeit coins. Zanzibar himself is traveling to the area in question in order to discern the truth."

"I see..." said Dawkson. "Well, let me know if anything comes up there. For the time being, I'd say we can leave it to Zanzibar."

"Understood, Master," Phufun said with a deep bow. *When Master Dawkson still went by Yuigarde, he would never trust his* *subordinates with something like that...* she reflected. *He would have said he would take care of it without a moment's thought and then leave before anyone could stop him...*

"Anything else?" Dawkson asked.

"Yes, Master. Princesses Nerona, Selinaphott, and Snow White are requesting an audience with you."

Dawkson slumped his shoulders in disappointment at the news, sighing audibly. "Those three again?" he said. "But they were just here yesterday..."

"That is true..." Phufun confirmed. "However, all three of them are here as representatives of demon tribes of considerable power..."

"If they were here for their tribes it'd be one thing," said Dawkson. "But it seems like they're just coming to exchange pleasantries, hoping I'll take one of 'em as my bride..."

The Dark One Dawkson, as it happened, was quite correct. Nerona was the princess of the dark elves to the north, and a childhood friend of Dawkson himself. Selinaphott, meanwhile, was the daughter of the current chief of the Western demons, whereas Snow White was the princess of the fable folk. The three women had all journeyed from their homes as candidates for the Dark One's hand in marriage. They held a cooking contest for Dawkson's hand, only for all three to be defeated by Phufun and forced to withdraw for the time being. With affairs among demonkind once more in order, however, Dawkson's fame as an enlightened ruler only continued to soar, and the three of them had once more begun to actively appeal for his hand.

Dawkson heaved a second sigh and pulled himself to his feet. "Well anyway, I've got somewhere to be on business. They'll have to have their audiences another day."

"May I ask where you are going?" Phufun inquired.

"The Fli-o'-Rys General Store in front of the citadel gates," Dawkson answered. "Gotta see how those malicium-nullifying magic gems are comin' along."

"The magic gems you requested be developed so that demons who lack the ability to control their own malicium could live alongside humans without injuring them?"

"That's right. If we had somethin' like that, we could kick our trade with the humans up another notch or two." Dawkson left the throne room, still sighing over the business with the bridal candidates.

Phufun saw him off, bowing deeply. “Now then,” she said, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. “I must let those three know that the Dark One will be unable to answer their petition today, due to some urgent business.”

Off to the side of the room, the little mad scientist girl Coqueshtti of the Infernal Four watched Phufun out of the corner of her eyes. *Huh? s*he thought. *Am I imagining it, or does Lady Phufun look rather pleased about something…?*

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

The morning after Flio moved Ura’s village mountain and all, Blossom found herself greeted by scores of oni standing in organized rank and file when she went to begin work on the farm.

“A good morning to you, Lady Blossom!” said Ura, who was standing at the head of the group.

“Mornin’, Ura!” Blossom answered. “Y’all sleep okay? No issues with the new place?”

“No issues at all!” Ura said with a hearty laugh. “It is a new place, as you say, but Lord Flio brought over the same houses we’ve been living in all this time. In fact, with all the food we had to eat last night, I’d say we slept better than usual!”

“Seems like your first night went well,” said Flio, walking up to Ura with Rys at his side. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Oh! Lord Flio!” Ura came running up when he saw Flio approach, wringing his hands together. “You’ve given all us villagers a place to live where we won’t need to worry about going hungry!” he said, tears of gratitude streaming from his eyes as he bowed his head over and over again. “I thank you! Truly!”

“Such an expressive oni, aren’t you? Always laughing or crying…” said Rys, a wry smirk coming over her face. “However, Ura, and your underlings too…” she added, transforming her right hand into a lupine demon claw as she glanced over the group with eyes like ice. “Now that you are the vassals of my lord husband, take care to attend properly to your work, won’t you? Do not expect forgiveness if I discover you to have been inconveniencing my lord husband.”

The group of oni felt a chill run down their collective spines. Only Ura, their leader, kept a level head in the face of Rys’s intimidation. “Understood,” he said, a serious look on his face. “I assure you, madame, if one of our number is so ungrateful as that, I’ll take care of the matter myself.” He thumped his chest with his closed fist to punctuate the statement.

Ura makes a good leader for those oni, Flio thought, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he watched. *It’s no mean feat to speak normally when Rys starts acting like that.*

“Now, then!” Ura declared. “As thanks for last night’s magnificent welcome feast, we’ll be sure to work especially hard today! Gah ha ha!”

“Thank you for last night!” another oni chimed in.

“It was delicious!” added another.

“Your cooking is the best in the world, madame!” said a third.

One by one, the oni offered their thanks to Rys.

The night before, Flio had held a banquet in the oni village to welcome the residents to Blossom’s Farm. It had been Rys who was in charge of the food preparations. Rys’s cooking skills had been improving at an alarming pace thanks to her experience running the kitchen of Flio’s House. Flio’s household had become quite large, after all, and many of its members were blessed with prodigious appetites. The oni, as it happened, had been moved to tears of gratitude by the taste of Rys’s cooking.

“I am very glad you enjoyed it!” said Rys. “Now, you had best work your hardest, for my lord husband and for your dinner.”

“Yeaaaaah!!!” came a rousing shout as the oni made their way into the fields.

“Long live our madame!” cheered an oni.

“I’d gladly die for you, madame!” added another.

At that, the goblins Maunty and Hokh’hokton came running up in front of the oni. “H-Hello, everyone!” said Maunty. “Please follow our instructions to begin with, would you?”

“Th-That’s right!” added Hokh’hokton. “First things first, would you please kindly assemble over by that ridge?” The oni did what they were told and gathered around the middle of the farm.

“What a sight!” Rys remarked as she watched. “It really is quite incredible...”

“Oh?” Flio asked. “What is?”

“Oni are a higher ranked species than goblin,” Rys said, frowning. “Demons of all sorts respect power above all else, you know. At the very least, I can assure you that I never heard of an oni taking orders from goblins when I was in the Dark Army...”

“I guess that’s just a sign that times are changing,” Flio said, gently placing a hand on Rys’s shoulder. “Personally, I believe that if we keep working hard, one day we’ll have world where everyone can live happy lives together. Just like how you and I learned to understand each other.”

“My lord husband...” Rys said, her cheeks flushing pink. His face was very close to hers indeed. Rys closed her eyes as Flio leaned in, nearly about to kiss her, when suddenly they were interrupted by a horrible noise—it sounded like a bloodcurdling scream, echoing throughout the farm.

“*Agaaaaaaahhhhhh?!?!?!*”

Jolted back to their senses by the sound, Flio and Rys sprang apart. “A-Ahem!” Flio said, clearing his throat and blushing as he glanced awkwardly the side. “E-Erm, that was quite the sound, wasn’t it? I wonder what that was about...”

“Y-Yes...” Rys agreed, blushing and staring at her feet. “What was that, I wonder...?”

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Telbyress stared dumbfounded up at the oni’s mountain, freshly teleported outside the farm just the other night. “A-A-Ahh...” she managed, pointing a trembling finger up at the peak. “Wh-What happened to the big tree that used to be around here...?” she asked. “Th-The big tree where I hid all my hard-earned liquor...?”

Yes—when Flio moved the oni’s mountain, he set it down right on top of the tree Telbyress had used to hide her liquor. He had taken great pains not to disturb Blossom Acres or Tia’s tea orchard, but Telbyress had hidden her liquor stockpile using a Concealment spell from the Celestial Plane, and Flio had overlooked its existence entirely. Alas, the tree, and Telbyress’s stockpile, now stood far, far away, where the oni’s mountain had once been.

“My liquor...” Telbyress sobbed, her eyes welling over with tears as she fell to her knees in despair. “My liquor... Oh, where did you go?”

The mountain towered silently before her, as if it had stood there for decades.

Chapter 2: Flio in the Land of the Rising Sun

◇Houghtow City—Behind the Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Balirossa stood with her sword on guard, her shoulders heaving with labored breath as she faced off against Ghozal. For his part, Ghozal was standing with his arms folded, perfectly at ease despite having a blade pointed in his direction. "Hrm," he said. "All right. Attack me from any direction."

"H-Hyah!" Balirossa cried, raising her sword up high and swinging with all her might.

Ghozal just barely dodged the blade—a feat that would have been impossible if his ability to follow Balirossa's swordplay had been anything short of perfect. "Hrm. You've improved. However!" In a single movement, he closed the distance between himself and Balirossa.

"W-Wah!" Balirossa cried, hastily returning her sword to a guard.

"Hrm! How about this!" Ghozal brought his right fist down in an empty-handed strike.

"Kh—!" Balirossa brought up her sword to deflect the blow. She made it by a hair's breadth, protecting herself from her husband's attack. Although he had struck the weapon with his bare skin, there was no sign of any cut on his arm.

"Hrm!" said Ghozal, grinning happily. "You were able to return to your guard in an instant right after delivering a full power attack! Excellent, Balirossa!"

Balirossa, in contrast to Ghozal's laid-back demeanor, was clearly giving the match her all. She corrected her stance, preparing for the next attack.

Greanyl watched from a short distance away as Ghozal and Balirossa carried on their bout. Greanyl was one of the members of the Silent Listeners, the organization that had once served as the

Dark Army's intelligence network. Currently, however, she worked for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store as the leader of their supply team, as well as the manager and a pilot of the Enchanted Frigate fleet.

"Those two are incredible, sparring like that during lunch break..." Greanyl remarked in admiration.

"They do it back here every day around noon," said a large man, stepping up next to Greanyl—Dalc Horst. "Always practicing her swordsmanship, that one."

"Have you finished your transportation duties, Lord Dalc Horst?" Greanyl asked, looking up at the large man towering over her. Compared to the petite Greanyl, Dalc Horst somehow looked even larger than normal.

"That's right," Dalc Horst said, smiling brightly. "It wasn't far. I was there and back in a single sprint."

Dalc Horst was a nightmare demon, the captain of the former Infernal Sleip's elite guard. Now he worked for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store as the head of the wagon crew and guard team.

With the pleasantries out of the way, Dalc Horst turned his attention towards Balirossa and Ghozal. "That Lady Balirossa, though..." he muttered. "She's been working hard at the store, but she never neglects her sword training whenever she has a moment of free time. She's a serious one...or maybe *passionate* is the better word. Either way, she's definitely worthy of respect."

"I agree," said Greanyl, nodding emphatically. "It is incredible to see such passion."

Balirossa was struggling to catch her breath as Greanyl and Dalc Horst watched, but she only allowed herself a short rest before steeling her nerves and challenging Ghozal once again with another mighty "Hyah!"

Ghozal and Balirossa had taken to doing daily sword training behind the Fli-o'-Rys General Store whenever they had a moment of free time. They had kept up this regimen day after day ever since the two had started working at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. By now, their sparring sessions were a familiar spectacle to the other members of the staff.

Balirossa spent the majority of her break time wielding her sword without pause against Ghozal, who opposed her empty-handed. Their training showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

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As their break time came to a close, Balirossa finally sat down to take a rest. She gasped for breath, her shoulders heaving up and down. Ghozal, by contrast, seemed perfectly unruffled by the exertion. He looked up at the sky. “Hrm,” he said. “Good weather again today. The wind feels nice.” He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of the wind blowing through his hair.

Balirossa’s cheeks flushed red as she looked up at her husband. *Every day has been full of surprises since I became Ghozal’s wife,* she thought. *And my life feels so much fuller than it ever did during my time in the Knight Academy, between daily training, working at the shop, looking after the children...and, of course, spending my nights curled up against my husband’s chest...* The blush began to spread from her cheeks, until her whole face seemed to be in danger of turning red.

“Hrm?” Ghozal asked. “What’s wrong, Balirossa? Are you feeling unwell?”

“N-N-Not at all!” Balirossa protested, hiding her face behind her left hand as she waved her right in front of her to abjure Ghozal’s question. “E-E-Everything is perfectly fine, I assure you!”

“Hrm?” Ghozal cocked his head dubiously even as he nodded in understanding. “Well, if everything’s fine, that’s all well and good...”

Every day is so delightful! I hardly deserve it... Balirossa thought, looking up at Ghozal between her fingers as she tried to hide her bright red face. *But if I am to be this man’s wife, I must become stronger. Stronger and stronger and stronger...*

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Arena◇

Class was out for the day, and the stands on the second floor of the arena were packed full far beyond their capacity. There were so many people watching that there wasn’t enough space for the spectators to move so much as an inch. Most of the people who had shown up to watch were women, and the arena was full of feminine voices cheering excitedly.

“Hey! No pushing!” protested one woman.

“Settle down! I can’t see!” another complained.

“Oh my gosh!” someone gushed. “He’s looking my way!”

All of their attention was fixed on one young man, standing in the middle of the arena floor—Flio’s son Garyl.

The Houghtow College of Magic had begun the process of expanding its scale of operations in order to meet the demand brought on by the Enchanted Frigates, and once again the campus had been opened to the public for the day. At first, most of the visitors really were interested in observing the campus. But soon rumors began to spread, started by those initial visitors themselves.

"One of the male students in the Houghtow College of Magic is simply incredible!"

"He's cool and chic, and a *wonder* with a sword!"

"He's kind to everyone, and he's got a smile that lights up a room!"

More and more people began to visit the Houghtow College of Magic, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the boy who was the subject of so much gossip. And when those people saw Garyl themselves, they spread gossip of their own in turn, until the Houghtow College of Magic arena simply could not seat any more spectators.

Salina glanced up at the crowd above from the training grounds on the arena's first floor. "I suppose it's only to be expected that Lord Garyl would be so well-liked," she said, "but isn't this just a little too much?"

"It seems like they must be talking about Gare all over the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode..." agreed Rislei.

◇Meanwhile—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Uliminas walked up to the register at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, and set the crate Greanyl had delivered down on top of the counter with a loud *thud*. Without missing a beat, the women milling around the shop stopped what they were doing and descended on the register.

"Meowll right everymeowne!" Uliminas declared, a self-satisfied smile on her face as she glanced over the assembled crowd. "Today's supply of commememewrative cards has arrived! Stock *is* limited, so act meow! It's furst come, furst serve!"

With those words, Uliminas began to take the brightly colored cards from their box. Each one was decorated with a printed image of Garyl. They were good pictures too—high quality and with true-to-life likeness of the boy. There were some cards depicting the Wolf of Justice in the mix as well, but the overwhelming majority were pictures of Garyl.

"Finally! How long have I waited to get my hands on a picture of Garyl?"

"Give me one of the cards, please!"

"I'll take three!"

"Hey! Only one per customer!"

Uliminas held the cards aloft as the crowd of women watched eagerly, chattering in high voices and raising their hands to get Uliminas's attention when they saw a card that caught their fancy. Before long, the cards were completely sold out.

I put some of the Silent Listeners who had artistic talent in charge of this purroject, but at this rate we might just need to hire additional illustrators... Uliminas mused, smiling broadly to herself.

Flio, by the way, had *not* been asked permission for this latest effort at merchandising on Uliminas's part...

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Arena◇

In the very middle of the arena, Garyl and Murasame were engaged in a mock battle. "Hah!" Garyl cried, deftly wielding his wooden sword as he advanced on the instructor.

The stands rang out with women's cheering voices.

"Eeee! Garyl!"

"So cool!"

"That's the spirit!"

Elinàsze could hardly believe the chorus of voices filling the room. "Wow..." she marveled, looking wide-eyed up at the stands. "They're so incredibly loud..."

"Poor Gare, though," Rislei said, frowning. "He's gotta make it so the people in the stands can follow the action, you know, so he can't really go all out..."

"Well, there's no helping that, I would think," said Elinàsze. "If Garyl and Miss Murasame actually fought with full force, the rest of us wouldn't even be able to understand what was happening..."

"That's true," Rislei conceded with a smirk. "And Mister Taclyde the administrator did tell them to hold back for the exhibition..."

Rislei and Elinàsze watched on in amusement as the match continued. *That being said, Garyl really is being faithful to the basic movements, isn't he?* Elinàsze thought, nodding to herself as she observed her brother's swordplay. *He must be trying to act as a perfect model so the rest of the fencing club can learn from his technique...*

As Elinàsze had observed, Garyl's movements in the bout were classical and precise. He was limiting himself to the basics of the basics, eschewing his usual acrobatic style that took advantage of his full physical abilities in favor of delivering simple basic strikes and guarding against Murasame's sword in turn before attacking again.

Elinàsze glanced to her side where Salina, Irystiel, and Snow Little were cheering Garyl on for all they were worth.

"Lord Garyl! That's the spirit! Attack! Attack!" cheered Salina.

"Go Lord Garyl! Kick her butt! That's what Irystiel says anyway. Mreowr!" cheered Irystiel's doll.

"Garyl's so dreamy, isn't he?" gushed Snow Little.

The three of them sounded just like the women in the stands. If Garyl's movements were a perfect model of swordsmanship, they seemed more inclined to cheer him on than take the opportunity to hone their own technique.

Still... Elinàsze reflected, sighing quietly to herself. *I suppose at the very least they* are *watching his movements closely...* It seemed that she was the only one who understood what Garyl was trying to do.

Garyl and Murasame exchanged blow after blow, neither one gaining or losing ground as the women in the stands cheered and cheered and cheered.

◇ ◇ ◇

The day's training was finished, and the members of the fencing club—Garyl in the middle—were kneeling on the floor in front of their instructor Murasame in a single row.

"Bow..." Murasame instructed, lowering her head herself to the students.

"Thank you for your instruction!" replied the class, bowing formally.

Miss Murasame is teaching us proper ritual etiquette in addition to swordsmanship... Elinàsze observed as she bowed alongside the other students. *The Houghtow College of Magic fencing club really is amazing!*

Initially, Elinàsze hadn't been very interested in swordplay. Her talents, after all, lay in magic. When she started accompanying Garyl to observe his club practice, however, she found herself drawn in by Murasame's ability to impart both sword techniques and etiquette with barely any words. And so, she joined the club herself.

Their lesson over, the students set to cleaning up the arena and the spectator stands, which were now empty of people; the hours for visiting had passed and the campus was no longer open to the public.

"All right," Garyl said, doing a few stretches with the broom still in hand. "Now that the cleaning's done, I guess it's time to head home!"

Before he could leave, however, Murasame, who had been cleaning alongside the students, stepped up to him. "Garyl..."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Garyl replied. "Is there something you need?"

"Just one thing..." Murasame began.

◇That Night—Flio's House◇

That night, Flio and Garyl stayed behind in the living room after everyone had finished dinner. "A sword-fighting tournament in Hi Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun?" Flio asked.

"That's right." Garyl nodded. "My club instructor Miss Murasame gave me an invitation and told me I should try joining if I felt like it. She said it would be a good opportunity, since I don't usually get to fight seriously during our club activities. Plus, she thought it might be a good idea to have experience participating in a big tournament like this if I transfer to the new Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education..."

"Well, I don't see why not!" Elinàsze declared, strolling up in her floppy indoor slippers to join the conversation. "So many techniques come from Hi Izuru that people say that country is the origin of swordplay itself! If Garyl could make a name for himself in a tournament in that part of the world, it could catapult him to fame overnight!"

"I'm not looking for fame or anything like that," Garyl said with a smile. "But there aren't that many sword-fighting tournaments in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, you know, and I want get a better idea of how good I actually am."

Flio looked his son over and nodded. "Well, if that's how you feel, I don't see the harm in it."

"Really? Thank you, dad!" Garyl said, beaming happily at his father's words.

"We actually got a request from Hi Izuru for an Enchanted Frigate stop, by the way," Flio mentioned. "Perhaps I'll come along and see if I can't fit in some negotiations."

"The trip will be a lot easier with you there! Thanks!" said Garyl.

"Oh?" Elinàsze said, perking up. "Well if you're going, papa, I suppose I'll go with you!"

"Me too!" Rislei, who had just come downstairs on her way to the bath, raised her hand in the air as she ran up to join them. "I wanna go! It sounds fun!"

Folmina and Ghoro followed closely after Rislei—they had been headed for the bath as well.

"I want to go too!" Folmina declared.

"I-If big sis is going, then I'll go too..." Ghoro added.

Next was Rylnàsze and Wyne's turn to join the fray as the two popped out of Sybe's enclosure in the back of the room. "E-Excuse me!" Rylnàsze said. "I would like to go as well!"

"Are we cheering-cheering for Gare-Gare?" Wyne asked. "Then I'm coming too-too!"

"The two of you were playing with Sybe again, I take it?" Flio asked, a smile coming to his face at the sight despite himself.

"S-Sir Flio!" Suddenly, Balirossa came running downstairs as fast as her legs would carry her, so eager that she just about bowled over Rylnàsze and Wyne. "If you mean to visit the Land of the Rising Sun, I beg you, please, take me along! I could never pass up an opportunity to experience Hi Izuran swordplay firsthand!"

Flio was somewhat taken aback by Balirossa's exuberance, but he quickly recovered. "All right, then." He nodded, looking over the small crowd that had gathered in front of him, Balirossa at their head. "We can all support Garyl in the tournament and get some sightseeing in while we're at it!"

"Awesome! You're the best, dad!" said Garyl.

"How delightful!" Elinàsze exclaimed. "Oh, I can hardly wait!"

"I wonder what the Land of the Rising Sun is like!" chimed in Rislei.

"Hooray!" cheered Folmina. "A trip!"

"A trip with big sis Folmina..." Ghoro rhapsodized to himself.

"I wonder what kind of magic beasts we'll meet in Hi Izuru!" said Rylnàsze.

"I can't wait-wait!" agreed Wyne.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

On the day of the trip, Flio and his household met up with Murasame at the Houghtow College of Magic front gates.

"Thank you for accompanying us today," Flio said, offering Murasame his hand.

"On the contrary, thank you for entertaining my proposition," said Murasame, bending her back at a perfect forty-five degree angle as she shook Flio's hand. "I believe this will be your group's first time visiting Hi Izuru. It would be my honor to serve as your guide."

"I'd appreciate that very much," Flio said. "We're in your hands."

"Now," Murasame said, "as for our method of transportation..." She cast her eyes to the group assembled behind Flio—Rys, wearing the usual dress she wore on outings; Flio's children, Garyl, Elinàsze, Rylnàsze, and Wyne; and Balirossa, Folmina, Ghoro, and Rislei. All of them were dressed for a vacation and were chatting eagerly in high spirits.

A troubled look crossed Murasame's face as she took stock of the number. *What am I to do...?* she thought. *I thought there would only be three or four coming along. The Teleportation Talisman I brought won't take this many people...*

Teleportation Talismans were slips of paper ensorcelled with Teleportation, a high level spell. Depending on the strength of the talisman, they were capable of transporting either a small or large number of people a considerable distance. Ordinarily, when a magic user cast Teleportation, they could only travel to places they had been before at least once. With a Teleportation Talisman, however, the destination was determined upon the talisman's creation, circumventing that limitation. The price of a Teleportation Talisman varied depending on the range and number of people it could transport. Talismans for moving large groups of people long distances could get very expensive indeed.

The Teleportation Talisman Murasame had purchased, incidentally, was one of the fine products available at the one and only Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that. You can leave transportation to us." Flio gave Murasame one of his easygoing smiles before turning to address his youngest daughter. "Rylnàsze, are you ready?"

Rylnàsze ran forward, a bright smile on her face. "Yes! Leave it to us!" she said, raising her right hand skywards. "Come out, Black Heboll!" A loud cry echoed throughout the area as an enormous magic beast covered in a coat of black fur landed beside the group.

Murasame stared dumbfounded at the creature. "That magic beast... Isn't that the same one that went on a rampage in the college's magic beast pasture not long ago...?"

"Me and big sis Wyne had a nice long talk with him after that," Rylnàsze explained cheerfully. "We're all very good friends now!"

"I-I see..." Murasame nodded, though her expression looked no less baffled.

Flio extended his hand and summoned a magic circle right in front of the magic beast Rylnàsze had referred to as Black Heboll, conjuring a large carriage. "Let's get inside," he proposed. "Black Heboll will take us to Hi Izuru."

"I see. I-I am much obliged for the help..." Murasame said, clearly flustered as she bowed towards Flio.

"No need to thank me!" Flio reassured her, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he opened the door to the carriage. "It's the least we can do after insisting on bringing so many people along!"

The assembled party all took Flio up on his offer and boarded the carriage. They found the inside to be quite spacious—there was room to spare in spite of the crowd. Needless to say, Flio had enlarged the interior using his magic.

Once everyone was safely on board and the doors were closed shut, Black Heboll spread his wings and took to the sky with a mighty "*Gwaaaah!*" as he grasped the carriage in his talons.

"Wow!" Folmina exclaimed, pressing herself right up to the window to get a good look at the outside. "We're going so, so, *so* fast!"

"Yeah..." Ghoro agreed, smiling as he sat next to his sister. "It's amazing..."

Everyone in the carriage gasped with delight at the view outside the windows. Everyone, that is, except Wyne.

"Hmph!" Wyne declared. "I can fly *much* faster-faster than this magic beast!" As she spoke, her newly evolved silver scales appeared on her body. It looked like she was poised to jump out of the moving carriage...but Flio's magic kept the doors locked tight, preventing her from opening them. "Papa!" Wyne protested. "Open-open the door!"

"I know very well how fast you are, Wyne," Flio told her. "But I'd appreciate it if you behaved yourself for today."

"Hmph!" Wyne repeated, puffing out her cheeks in a dramatic pout as she returned to her humanoid form. Her poncho had been ripped apart by the sharp silver scales, leaving her stark naked, but Flio acted quickly. He held out his arm and a magic circle appeared in front of his hand. An instant later, a brand-new poncho appeared on Wyne's body. "Mrr..." Wyne grumbled. "Papa...not my undies too..." Apparently Flio had rematerialized not only the poncho but Wyne's undergarments as well. Dissatisfied, Wyne lifted up the hem of her poncho to take them off.

"Now, Wyne," Rys said, pushing Wyne's hand back down. "Your father went through the trouble of recreating your underwear for you, so be a good girl and keep them on. If you don't, Tanya will be angry with you again." Rys was smiling sweetly, but her hand was transformed into a lupine demon's powerful claw. Beneath her smile, she was actually exerting a great deal of power.

"O-Okay, mama..." Wyne said, looking up at Rys with a loving smile on her face. "I won't take off my undies. Just don't get angry-angry with me..."

"Oh Wyne, you know I could never be angry with you!" Rys said, smiling back. Of course, her aura of malicium had been flickering in and out of sight during the entire exchange.

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Once Wyne had settled down, Garyl took out a piece of paper and began looking it over.

"Garyl?" Elinàsze asked. "What is that you're reading?" Curious, she peered over Garyl's shoulders to see a list of names written neatly in a row.

"Oh!" said Garyl. "I just thought it would be nice to buy souvenirs for everyone who's been helping me out!"

"Well, I do recognize the names of the people in the house, and at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, and our classmates..." Elinàsze said, pointing towards the bottom of the list. “But, Garyl, aren’t *those* people all just girls who have been harassing you?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by ‘harassing,’” Garyl said, smiling up at his sister. “Those people have been coming to watch our fencing club practice, and they’ve even brought me refreshments and stuff a few times. I figured I should thank them properly, even if it’s a little late in coming...”

He puts far too much thought into this sort of thing... Elinàsze thought, sighing as she looked back at her brother’s smile. *This is exactly why he’s gotten so senselessly popular.*

“Huh?” said Rislei, who had been peering at Garyl’s list over his shoulder on the opposite side from Elinàsze. “How come Miss Ellie’s name isn’t on this list, Gar?”

“O-Oh...” Garyl said, scratching the tip of his nose in a nervous gesture. “I was going to buy something for Miss Ellie, separate from everyone else...”

I seeee... Rislei thought, nodding to herself. *He’s always mindful when it comes to Miss Ellie...* “By the way,” she added, turning to Elinàsze. “Are you getting souvenirs for anyone, Eli?”

“Huh?” Elinàsze replied, blinking in confusion. “Why would I need to buy souvenirs? Papa’s coming with us!” There wasn’t a trace of irony in her voice.

“A-Ah...” Rislei said. “Y-Yes, of course. Sorry, silly question.” *That’s right,* she thought, lowering her head and smirking to herself. *A serious daddy’s girl like Eli wouldn’t even think of buying souvenirs for anyone else...*

Elinàsze, it was true, was a pretty young girl with a charming smile who treated everyone she met with kindness...but due to her severe father complex, she could sometimes be thoughtless in how she treated the people in her life aside from her beloved papa, Flio.

As the group settled in for their journey, Black Heboll carried the carriage on through the sky, flying at lightning speed.

◇ ◇ ◇

After flying for practically half the day, Black Heboll reached the edge of the continent and passed over to the open sea.

“This is the Hi Izuru Sea,” Murasame explained as another landmass came into view on the horizon. “When we cross these waters, we will be in the Land of the Rising Sun.”

“Hi Izuru’s borders have been closed for a while, haven’t they?” Flio asked Murasame. “I heard it’s impossible to enter the country without passing through a special designated area...”

“That is correct,” Murasame confirmed. “There is a powerful barrier around the entirety of Hi Izuru meant to protect it from attacks by the Dark Army, preventing anyone from entering aside from through the approved gateways.”

Flio looked out the front window as the Land of the Rising Sun came into proper view ahead of the carriage. *I do see a barrier around the island...* he thought, tilting his head. *But is it really all that powerful...?* Flio mentally cast a spell, and a window appeared in his vision.

◇Wide Range Barrier Active

◇Dispel Magic Effective

◇Dispel? (Yes/No)

I-I knew it... Flio thought, smirking despite himself. *I could dispel this one no problem if I wanted...*

The instant Flio had hit Level 2, every single one of his attributes immediately grew so high that the status screen could no longer display them properly, rendering them instead only as “∞.” Moreover, whenever he came into direct contact with a type of magic he could not already use, he would immediately achieve mastery of every spell that existed within that category, up to the maximum level allowed by his prodigious abilities. As such, he had not only mastered all magic in common practice in the world of Klyrode, but the magic of the origin of light and darkness, the black arts practiced by Damalynas, and the magic of the Realm of Evil as well, to name a few. The barrier spells of Hi Izuru, meanwhile, were a strict downgrade when compared to the magic of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode itself. For Flio, dispelling such a barrier would be child’s play.

“Er...Mister Flio?” Murasame asked. “Is something the matter?”

“O-Oh! No, nothing at all!” Flio replied.

“I am relieved to hear it,” Murasame said. “Now, first let us head for Nagaseki, one of the points of passage. Once we obtain permission to enter the country, we will be able to come and go within Hi Izuru as we please. Although, when we exit the country, we will need to pass through the gateway once again...”

“That seems like a pretty strict system, considering the peace treaty the Dark Army signed...” Flio remarked, cocking his head in confusion.

“True, the Dark Army is bound by a treaty...” said Murasame. “The Land of the Rising Sun is far from the Dark Citadel, however, and there are many demons who do not heed the will of the Dark One. Moreover, the sea around Hi Izuru is inhabited by creatures known as Divine Beasts who hold magic power far beyond any ordinary magic beast. The barrier also serves the purpose of preventing them from devastating the country.”

“Huh,” Flio said, nodding in understanding. “I had no idea there were magic beasts like that in the area.”

“My lord husband,” began Rys, who had been looking out the window as Flio and Murasame spoke. “Something is approaching. It seems to be a winged demihuman...”

“Oh, that must be the guard stationed at the checkpoint,” said Murasame, approaching the carriage window. “Allow me to deal with them.” She produced an enchanted entrance permit from her breast pocket and held it up for the guard to see. The demihuman looked the permit over, then moved in front of Black Heboll to lead him through the checkpoint. More winged demihumans joined them as they went along, surrounding the carriage.

Flio watched the guards work, clearly impressed. *Hi Izuru looks like it has pretty tight security,* he thought. *The guards didn’t waste a moment before approaching as soon as Black Heboll got close. And they’re doing a good job of leading us in too...*

Before long, Black Heboll had brought the party down outside the Nagaseki checkpoint. He set the carriage on the ground, landing beside them. Flio and his companions disembarked in an orderly file.

“I must say, Black Heboll is quite impressive,” Murasame remarked, looking up in admiration at the magic beast. “Ordinarily it takes two days to fly the distance between the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode to the Land of the Rising Sun, even paying for one of Hi Izuru’s aerial transports...”

Black Heboll proudly held his head high, seemingly able to understand Murasame’s words.

“So this is Hi Izuru...” said Flio, looking all around as he stepped down from the carriage. The rest of his party all gathered around him.

“Oh?” said Rys, noticing a woman approaching and turning to face her. “Someone seems to be coming to meet us.”

She's speaking calmly, but it looks like she's transformed her nails into lupine claws just in case... Flio observed. *That's Rys for you!* Grateful for his wife's vigilance, Flio turned to face the newcomer.

The woman was slight of build and wearing a light-pink robe of the sort used in the Far East—a kimono. She came running up to the group and stopped in front of Murasame to examine her entrance permit.

"Let me see..." she said. "You are...Murasame-sama and her honorable guests, correct? I welcome you to the Land of the Rising Sun. I am Itsuhachi, a clerk serving at the Nagaseki checkpoint." Itsuhachi bowed deeply to Murasame and turned to address Flio and the rest. "My apologies, but before you may enter the country, you must submit an entrance application. It is nothing onerous. Please fill out the forms at your leisure." Smiling brightly, she led Flio and the rest into a nearby wooden office building and handed each of them a form.

So we have to write in our names, land of origin, and purpose in visiting Hi Izuru, huh...? Flio observed, looking over the paperwork before setting to fill out the required fields. Behind him, Rys and the rest entered the relevant information in forms of their own. When everyone had finished, Itsuhachi collected the forms and looked them over, nodding to herself as she read.

"Thank you," she said, bowing deeply. "That is all we need. We will stable your magic beast for you at the checkpoint until your return. We will handle its care and feeding while you are away. Now, please enjoy your two-day stay in Hi Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun."

"Um," Flio said. "Excuse me..."

"Yes, is something the matter?" Itsuhachi asked.

"Well, you see, my name is Flio, proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode," Flio explained, producing the letter he had received from the Hi Izuru government and handing it over to Itsuhachi. "I received a request from your Ministry of Foreign Affairs to set up an Enchanted Frigate station. I was wondering if perhaps I could schedule a meeting..."

"I remember this letter!" Itsuhachi declared, smiling brightly as she read. "I was the one who had it sent! I oversee this checkpoint as a member of the Hi Izuru Ministry of Foreign Affairs, you see! Might I ask you to return to the office, Flio-sama?"

"Of course!" Flio said, heading back to the building where they had filled out their entrance applications at Itsuhachi's instruction. "Excuse me."

"I will accompany you, my lord husband," Rys volunteered, following after Flio.

"Why don't the rest of you let Miss Murasame show you around Hi Izuru?" Flio suggested, looking behind him to address Garyl and the others who had been standing by. "It seems Rys and I will be busy discussing things with Miss Itsuhachi."

"Very well," said Murasame, bowing towards Flio and Rys. "Perhaps you will be able to join us next time. Now, everyone, this way please..."

Murasame led the group through the exit of the checkpoint, towards the red shrine gates ahead.

◇Land of the Rising Sun—Checkpoint Exit◇

Murasame passed through the gates that marked the checkpoint exit, leading Garyl and the others on into Hi Izuru proper. Balirossa followed last in line, looking all around with great interest. "So this is the Land of the Rising Sun..." Her hand was resting on the hilt of her sword, ready to draw it at a moment's notice should she need.

Murasame, at the head of the group, observed Balirossa with approval. *This Balirossa woman never lowers her guard for a single moment...* she thought. *It had escaped my notice before, but it seems she possesses a certain amount of skill...* "Now then," she said, addressing the rest of the group. "Allow me to show you around the area until Lord Flio concludes his business."

After leaving the checkpoint, the party came to a single long bridge. That one bridge seemed to be the only route leading on to the mainland. They crossed to the opposite shore, where the city stretched out before them.

"Look at that!" Garyl remarked, looking around at the buildings as they walked. "Buildings here are pretty different from the ones in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode!"

"According to a book I read, buildings in Hi Izuru are mostly made from wood, with an earthen plaster called 'shikkui' spread over top," Elinàsze explained.

"Oh, really!" Rylnàsze chirped. "Then, are those white walls made from this shikkui?"

"Yes, I imagine they must be," said Elinàsze.

While Garyl, Elinàsze, and Rylnàsze were discussing the walls, Rislei's attention was turned towards the ground beneath their feet. "Look at that!" she said, looking down at the multitude of small stones paving the road, trampled flat by countless feet. "They must not use cobblestones to pave the streets in Hi Izuru!"

"Streets in Hi Izuru are paved with lots and lots of tiny stones called 'jari,'" Folmina expounded with an air of superior knowledge. "There are places where they use cobblestones too, but jari is the traditional material for pavement."

"These are the jari..." Ghoro added.

"Huh!" said Rislei. "Good to know!"

Wyne, meanwhile, was busy sniffing at the air. "Mm... Something smells tasty-tasty!" she said, looking every which way for the source of the delectable smell. Then, with one final decisive sniff, she stopped. "There!" she declared, pointing to a building on the corner of the avenue. "There's a tasty-tasty smell coming from over there!" The building had a number of long wooden benches set out by the entryway, and a banner out front displaying the words "Tea House."

"Ah!" said Murasame. "That is an establishment that serves tea and accompanying sweets. It is not unlike the cafes you have in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. If it would please you, we could seek rest there, and—"

Wyne took off for the tea house at a mad dash before Murasame could finish speaking. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"Ah! Big sis Wyne! I'm coming too!" said Folmina, chasing after her.

"If big sis Folmina is going, I'm going too..." said Ghoro, following his sister in turn.

"Ha ha, let's not go causing any accidents, okay?" Garyl said, chasing after the other three. "The tea house isn't going anywhere!"

Elinàsze found herself smirking with amusement as she watched her brother chase after Wyne and the younger kids. *There was a time when Garyl would dart out first, even ahead of big sis Wyne...* she thought, making her own way towards the tea house. *He really has grown up, hasn't he...?*

Soon, the group was passing through the tea house gate.

◇ ◇ ◇

“What is this?” Wyne exclaimed, eagerly shoving the rest of the skewer of three sweet rice dumplings, which the Hi Izurans called dango, into her mouth. “It’s super-super delicious!”

The group had ordered a tea and dango set at Murasame’s recommendation. Skewered dumplings of that sort were a rarity in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and they had been a little nervous to try it at first, but the instant they saw Wyne shove the skewer in her mouth and heard her cries of joy, each of them went to try a bite of their own.

“Well, these really are good!” Elinàsze declared.

“Yes!” agreed Rylnàsze, sharing a smile with her sister. “They’re very sweet and very good!”

“Yeah! It’sh sho good! *Gulp!*” said Folmina, her mouth stuffed full of gooey dumpling. “Thish ish *really* good! *Om nom...*”

“It is...” Ghoro said, wincing back at the display. “But maybe you should wait until you’re finished eating to speak, big sis Folmina...”

“Yes, Ghoro is right, Folmina,” said Balirossa, likewise taken aback.

“*Gobble gulp...* Ohkay, shorry, mom...*snarf snap...*” answered Folmina.

“Seconds-seconds!” cried Wyne, leaping to her feet and holding her empty plate aloft, shaking it vigorously towards the back of the tea house.

“Y-Yes, ma’am! Another serving, coming right up!” A woman in a kimono carrying a tray in her hand, making her way to and fro between the rows of customers, smiled as she took Wyne’s order.

Murasame looked over the scene Wyne had started and smiled with relief.

“Is there something amiss, Miss Murasame?” Balirossa asked.

“No, nothing at all! But...how do I put this...?” Murasame started with a smirk. “In the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, one can find nigh on anything, but the Land of the Rising Sun is not so. Some might say our food, too, is rustic and backwards. I had been anxious as to whether we could find fare that would be pleasing to everyone’s paletes, but it seems they are delighted with the food. I suppose it is something of a relief...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it ‘backwards’ at all!” Balirossa reassured her, smiling brightly. “A place like this where you can enjoy tea and sweet dumplings would be a worthy addition to any city! And these ‘dango,’ as you call them, are delicious as well! I find myself quite as taken with them as Wyne seems to be.”

“Hey, Bali-Bali,” said Wyne, choosing just that moment to grab hold of Balirossa’s arm. “Can I get another plate-plate?” Her cheeks were stuffed full with what was left of her second order of dumplings.

“S-Say what?!” Balirossa exclaimed. “Y-You already finished your second order?”

“Yeah, so gimme more! Gimme more!” Wyne demanded.

“A-All right, very well...” said Balirossa. “But we are going to eat dinner later tonight, so try to eat in moderation...”

“Okay! I will-will!” Wyne agreed, turning to wave at the woman who had brought her her last helping of dango. “More dango!” she cried, grinning with her whole face. “Gimme thirty-thirty plates, please!”

“H-How many?!” Balirossa’s eyes went wide. “Wyne, isn’t that overdoing it a little?”

“But I really wanna eat thirty plates!” Wyne pleaded. “I’ve been good-good!”

“Th-Thirty plates...” Balirossa repeated, flinching back. “Whatever will become of Wyne’s stomach, I wonder...”

Wyne just sat there beaming in the face of Balirossa’s disbelief, until the smiling tea house waitress brought over her order. “Here you go! Your additional dango, ma’am!”

“Finally!” Wyne said, taking plate after plate and shoving the dango right in her mouth. “These dango are so tasty-tasty!” she declared, beaming even as her face became too stuffed full of the white dumplings to fully close her mouth.

Passersby on the street took note of Wyne delightfully eating dumpling after dumpling.

“H-Hey! Those dango that girl is eating look really good!”

“Perhaps we should try them as well!”

“Indeed... Then, shall we take a break?”

More and more customers entered the shop to order dango, drawn in by Wyne’s display. Before long, there wasn’t an empty seat in the entire tea house.

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“Well then, Miss Itsuhachi,” said Flio, “I’ll be in touch again soon to discuss the construction of an Enchanted Frigate boarding tower."

"Thank you!" Itsuhachi answered. "I look forward to our discussion!"

Their meeting concluded, Flio and Rys exited the office building. Itsuhachi saw them off with a bow. "I'm glad you were able to come to an agreement without too much trouble, my lord husband," said Rys, wrapping her arm around Flio's.

"Me too," said Flio.

Rys and Flio both had changed from their usual clothing into Hi Izuran kimono at Itsuhachi's recommendation back in the office. "*By the way,*" she had said during their discussion of the new Enchanted Frigate route, "*do the two of you have any interest in Hi Izuran kimono? I would be delighted if you were to try wearing them!*"

What she's really hoping is that we'll like them enough to start selling them at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store... Flio thought, testing the fit of the kimono as he walked. "These kimono are easier to move around in than I would have thought," he said. "And it doesn't look bad worn loose either..."

"I agree," Rys said, adjusting the fit around her chest and inspecting the armholes with a serious look on her face. "I've never worn anything quite like it, but between the vibrant colors and elegant form I can certainly imagine it becoming a popular item in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode with just a little bit of arrangement."

Flio, meanwhile, was thinking back on his conversation with Itsuhachi and her superiors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *The Hi Izuru government closed the borders and made it an official policy not to involve themselves with outside affairs in order to protect the country from attacks by demons,* he thought. *But now that there's a peace treaty between humans and demons, it sounds like they're working on officially opening the country and resuming their involvement with the rest of the world, so opening this Enchanted Frigate route will be an important first step. It sounds like a lot of responsibility, but it definitely seems worth doing...* He nodded seriously, psyching himself up for the task ahead.

"But more importantly, my lord husband," Rys continued, "now that we've finished our work talks, shall we meet up with the others and do a bit of sightseeing around Hi Izuru?"

"Yes, let's," Flio agreed, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "Want me to go ahead and start looking for them?" He held out his arm and cast a simple spell, a magic circle appearing in front of his hand. *Now then, let's use my Search spell to see where everyone has gone off to...* he thought, but just at that moment he was interrupted.

Ka-foooom!!! An enormous sound echoed throughout the city as a conflagration of flames erupted from the direction of the nearby mountain.

"Wh-What in the world is *that?!*" Rys exclaimed, her eyes going wide at the sight. She rolled up the sleeves of her kimono, transforming her hands back into lupine claws. Before she could act, however, Flio placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It looks like there's something coming from beneath the fire," Flio said. "Seems to be a magic beast."

"Beneath *that* fire?" Rys asked. She strained her eyes to see but was unable to make out anything that resembled a magic beast. Perhaps the flames were simply too intense.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no!" cried Itsuhachi, running through the red shrine gates that marked the end of the checkpoint in an incredible hurry and coming up beside the couple. "How terrible!" she said, clasping both hands over her awestruck mouth, her face practically white. "Could that possibly be Mount Gokoku?"

"Mount...Gokoku?" Rys asked.

"Yes..." said the pale and trembling Itsuhachi. "The Divine Beast, the Yamata Dragon, was sealed away in that mountain. But if it's erupting..." She shook her head. "Th-There's no time! I'll have to send a dispatch request to the Gokoku Strike Force immediately! Oh, but why would the Yamata Dragon suddenly awaken after being quiet for nearly five hundred years?" Flapping her arms, Itsuhachi ran back the way she came, returning to the checkpoint office building.

In the skies above, a group of winged demihumans were flying towards the mountain, no less alarmed by the state of affairs. The streets around Flio and Rys, meanwhile, were full of panicked bystanders crying in alarm as they scrambled to escape.

"What the heck?! Wh-Why is Mount Gokoku erupting like that?!"

"Could it be? Has the Divine Beast awakened?!"

"Well, whatever it is, we need to get out of here!"

"G*raaaahhh!!!*" An ear splitting roar came from somewhere within the inferno, drowning out the bystanders' voices. A colossal dragon's head emerged from the flames, and then another, and another, until there were seven heads in total glaring down from the top of the fire, their long necks covered in bright red scales.

The members of the Gokoku Strike Force came running out from the checkpoint, crying in bewilderment and dismay at the sight of the enormous Divine Beast that had appeared from the mountain.

"I-It's true! The Divine Beast is back!"

"There's no mistaking it. That's the Yamata Dragon, straight from the legends!"

"I've heard the tales, b-but I had no idea that thing was so enormous!"

Itsuhachi, meanwhile, had reached the checkpoint's loudspeaker. Her voice rang out loud and clear throughout the surrounding area. "Gokoku Strike Force, Familiar Brigade...move out!" she called. On her signal, a group of magic beasts emerged from the sea. They had blue scales on their entire bodies and wings that they beat to fly, heading in the direction of Mount Gokoku. However...

"What can they do? They're so much smaller..."

"It's like a small child squaring up against an adult..."

Unfortunately, it was just as the Gokoku Strike Force members said. None of the magic beasts in the Familiar Brigade were even half the size of the Yamata Dragon—they were closer to a tenth. The beasts shot jets of water from their mouths, attacking the Divine Beast, but the liquid evaporated before it could reach the seven-headed monstrosity. They were, it seemed, wholly incapable of damaging it.

Itsuhachi's voice on the speakers seemed to be despairing of their chances as well. "I-It can't be... What are we to do...?" She had forgotten to switch the sound amplifier off in her hopelessness before the situation unfolding in front of her eyes.

By this point, the Yamata Dragon had fully emerged in all its glory as a Divine Beast, crouching on four legs atop the summit of Mount Gokoku. Its torso was massive, with seven long necks extending from its front, paired with seven tails swaying menacingly from behind. It glared down at the Familiar Brigade, secure in its sheer unassailable size. The familiars, for their part, gave no sign of attempting to draw any closer to their opponent—they were paralyzed with fear. Some of them even turned around and fled back into the ocean.

The Yamata Dragon looked all around with its seven heads and began to make its way down the mountain at a languid pace.

"Well, well," said Flio with an air of mild curiosity. "So that's the Divine Beast, the Yamata Dragon, huh?"

"And to think," said Rys, peering closely at the creature, "until just a second ago it seemed quite in its element atop that mountain..."

"*G-Grah...?"* Sensing something was amiss, the Yamata Dragon began looking up and down with its seven heads, trying to discern the source of its sudden discomfort. Then it realized—it was no longer on Mount Gokoku, where it had been just moments earlier. It was surrounded on all sides by some sort of crystal, lending the light a strange wavering quality.

Flio held the crystal in his hand, the Divine Beast sealed within. The moment the Yamata Dragon had begun its descent down the mountain, Flio had held out his right hand and started casting a spell, saying, "*We probably shouldn't let this one run its course, I suppose...*" He summoned an intricately complicated compound magic circle which extended outwards towards the dragon, enveloping its body in the blink of an eye and harmlessly absorbing the flames it had been spewing every which way. Then, once the magic had completely engulfed the dragon, it began to shrink with remarkable speed, spinning through the air like a boomerang back into Flio's hands. The dragon's body had shrunk along with the magic circle until it was small enough to fit inside the crystal that appeared in Flio's hand.

The whole thing took no more than a single second.

"Huh? Wh-What?" came Itsuhachi's bewildered voice over the loudspeaker. "Wh-Where did the Yamata Dragon go?"

The familiars who were still airborne flew around and around the mountain. Judging by their behavior, they were just as perplexed as Itsuhachi. The fire that had consumed Mount Gokoku, however, had vanished without a trace. The only sign that anything had ever been amiss was the enormous hole from which the Yamata Dragon had emerged.

Garyl and the rest of the party, meanwhile, had been watching the scene play out from the teahouse. The building was now nearly empty—most of the customers had fled when the dragon first appeared.

"Ngah?!" Wyne cried, staring dumbfounded in the direction of Mount Gokoku. Her upper body was covered in the silver scales of her evolved form. "Where did that magic beast go-go?!"

When the dragon had first appeared, Wyne had wasted no time in activating her evolution, declaring, "*I'll take care-care of this one!*" This instant she had spread her wings and prepared to take off, however, the enormous dragon suddenly vanished from sight.

"Fweh?!" Rylnàsze reeled in shock, staring off at the mountain with an expression every bit as dumbfounded as Wyne's. "What happened to the Divine Beast?" The air around her was full of flying magic beasts, all of which were her own familiars. Usually they hid themselves in her shadow, but they had emerged when the dragon appeared, sensing that Rylnàsze was in danger.

Elinàsze, meanwhile, had been standing with her arms outstretched conjuring a magic circle, the jewel on her forehead shining with rainbow light. "Hah..." she sighed, a look of clear disappointment on her face. "Papa got to it first..." The light from her jewel went dim, and her magic circle vanished.

"I was hoping to exchange blows with that thing too..." Garyl said, returning his sword to its scabbard. "It seemed like a worthy opponent..." He didn't bother dispelling the complicated series of enchantment spells he had cast on his sword, letting it glow with a brilliant light even as it hung sheathed on his belt.

"You two are out of this world, Gare and Eli," Rislei remarked. "I could never manage anything like that."

Even Murasame, who had been staring at Garyl's sword from behind Rislei, couldn't help nervously swallowing at the sight, rooted to the spot by the effort of gauging the extent of Garyl's abilities. *S-Such a vast array of enchantment spells!* she thought. *With a sword enhanced to that degree, Garyl might just have been able to cut one of the Yamata Dragon's heads clean off...*

"Hmph!" Folmina pouted, frowning theatrically as she folded her arms behind her head. "I wanted to fight the magic beast too!"

"I-I know you're amazing, big sis Folmina, but I don't think that would have been a good idea..." said Ghoro, tugging at her sleeves to get her attention and shaking his head emphatically.

"Awww!" Folmina objected, clearly chagrined. "But... But...I wanna!"

"Now, now, Folmina. Ghoro has the right of it," said Balirossa, gently patting Folmina's head. "At your current level, you could perhaps knock out one of the heads, but you would almost certainly be hit by the dragon's breath..."

"Huh..." Folmina said, folding her arms and nodding her head. "Well, if you say so, mother, I guess it's probably true..." Folmina, after all, had absolute faith in Balirossa's ability to gauge an opponent's strength.

◇That Night◇

It was the night after the excitement with the Yamata Dragon, and Flio and his companions were staying in an old-fashioned inn called Ichimu-an nestled away in the mountains surrounded by a grove of thin and tall treelike plants local to Hi Izuru known as bambu. Ichimu-an was built simply yet tastefully designed, with a small waterfall in the garden and other attractive features. Flio's party was staying in a room large enough to house everyone at once.

"Y-You know..." Flio said, smiling awkwardly at the extravagant dinner that had been set out for them. "There's really no need to provide us with a room as incredible as this. I can return home whenever I like using my Teleportation spell, after all..."

"No, no, that would never do!" Itsuhachi protested, leaning in emphatically. "You are the mighty champion who saved us from the menace of the Divine Beast, the Yamata Dragon! It would bring shame to Hi Izuru if we failed to hold a banquet in your honor, as thanks for your deeds!" Itsuhachi, who had changed from the proper formal kimono she had been wearing during the day to a more coquettish outfit that exposed both her shoulders, held out the narrow sake bottle to pour for Flio. "Now, please allow me to pour you a drink!"

"W-Well, all right. Thank you very much," said Flio, accepting Itsuhachi's offer.

Suddenly, a man came up to Flio, just about pushing Itsuhachi out of the way. "Are you the Flio-dono who vanquished the Yamata Dragon?" he asked. He was wearing a dazzling, extravagant kimono and had a great big grin on his face as he regarded Flio. Behind him stretched a line of other men and women in formal costume—people from all over Hi Izuru who had heard of Flio's victory.

Laughing boisterously, the man pressed another cup of sake onto Flio. "The Divine Beast—the Yamata Dragon—is said of old to be nothing short of a natural disaster, something against which neither human nor demon can contend," he said. "Indeed, it is said that Haruna Arube, the greatest mage in the history of Hi Izuru, gave their life to seal the dragon away. But you, Flio-dono, are like Haruna Arube returned! It is no exaggeration to say that you are the protector of the Land of the Rising Sun." As he finished pouring, the man leaned in to whisper in Flio's ear. "And if it pleases you, sir, my noble house would be happy to offer you employment..."

"A moment, I beg of you!" one of the women in line behind the man interrupted. She was holding a fan made of bird feathers in her hand. "One who has strength enough to defeat the Yamata Dragon would be better suited to serve under *my* master instead!" she declared. "As a token of our sincerity, I am prepared to offer any sum of money you might ask for." She clapped her hands to signal the monkey waiting on her as her familiar, who produced a bar of yellow gold for Flio's perusal. A second later, however, the monkey was sent flying by a powerful kick.

"Take that, you wretch!" said the powerfully muscular deer demihuman woman who had kicked the monkey out of the way. "Using your money to get your way... Reprehensible!" Then the deer woman sidled up to Flio. "I am afraid we cannot offer the same quantity of gold as this woman, but I can assure you that every one of us from my master on down will welcome you warmly and see to your every need. Perhaps even as soon as this banquet is concluded, if that is your wish..." she added, slyly exposing her chest with a wink.

A second later, the deer woman found a set of sharp claws pressed up against her throat. Rys, who had come up from behind with just her right hand transformed back into her original lupine claws, smiled brightly. "Excuse me," she said, "but this is a family dinner you are intruding upon, and I'm afraid I find that offer of yours to be utterly distasteful. I am going to have to ask you to kindly never show your face in front of my lord husband ever again." She spoke calmly, but there was clear killing intent behind those claws.

The deer woman glanced down at Rys's claws and swallowed. *That's right—I had heard that this woman was Flio-dono's wife...* she thought. *B-But to think she would be able to come up behind me without my noticing her presence... She must be a woman of considerable ability.* Unable to move a single muscle in the face of Rys's intimidating presence, the woman simply stood there with Rys's claws pressed up against her as Rys turned to address the rest of the individuals who were waiting in line for a chance to speak to Flio.

"And so," Rys said, "I would ask all of you to please leave for the time being."

"B-But..." one of them protested.

"Our masters all ordered us to do whatever it took to invite you to their service..." said another.

"We can't simply return empty-handed!" a third complained.

"Am I understood?" Rys asked, her bright smile never faltering. Her eyes, though, were as cold as ice, and an aura of malicium had begun to flicker menacingly behind her.

The line of unwanted guests found themselves speechless.

"Am I *understood*?" Rys repeated, glancing at each of the intruders in turn.

There was no need for Rys to repeat herself a second time.

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"Mister Flio, I am very sorry that you and everyone else had to deal with such an unpleasant encounter," Murasame said, bowing her head gravely once the servants of the noble houses had all vacated the premises. "There are many noble houses in Hi Izuru, and all of them seek to expand their own domain through interminable petty squabbles. They are always desperate to find more powerful servants they can use to this end. If they could employ someone like you, who defeated the Yamata Dragon, it would easily make them the strongest in the land. I suppose I can understand their desperation, but as a fellow Hi Izuran I somehow feel like I should apologize for this side of my homeland..."

"Please, don't worry about it," Flio said, giving Murasame one of his trademark easygoing smiles. "It didn't bother me at all."

"Mister Flio..."

"I have no intention of working for any sort of nobility, so I was going refuse their offers no matter how they asked," Flio said.

"I see..." said Murasame. "In that case, I suppose the nobility will just have to understand..."

Flio nodded in agreement.

Rys, who was sitting next to Flio, puffed out her cheeks in a pout, looking deliberately in the other direction. "Well, personally, I simply can't bring myself to forgive them for attempting to seduce my lord husband..."

"N-Now, now, Rys..." Flio said, placing a hand on Rys's shoulder. "You know you're the only one I love. You don't need to worry—no other woman is ever going to steal away my heart."

"W-Well!" Rys sputtered, turning bright red all the way to her shoulders. "I wish you wouldn't say such embarrassing things in front of everyone! B-But it does make me happy to hear that..." Still blushing furiously, she sidled up closer to her husband. The anger in her face had vanished in an instant, leaving a contented smile in its place.

"S-So, now that that's taken care of..." Flio said, glancing at Rys out of the corner of his eye. "Let's enjoy this dinner, everyone!"

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At Flio's words, the party finally began the dinner that had been laid out for them.

"What excellent food!" Elinàsze cried. "The quality and taste are both exceptional!"

The table was set with a great number of small dishes, each arranged with exacting skill. The overall effect was very colorful and lent the feast a sense of plentiful abundance. Elinàsze tried a little bit of everything, making delighted exclamations with each bite.

"I've never *seen* cooking like this in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, that's for sure," Rislei remarked, a smile on her face as well as she devoured her own portion.

Rys listened keenly to Elinàsze and Rislei's reactions, observing the food closely. Rys had become fairly obsessed with cooking and had taken it upon herself to run the house's kitchen. There was a considerable number of mouths to feed on a daily basis between everyone lodging at Flio's house, and some of them were capable of eating five ordinary portions in a single sitting. She simply didn't have time to artfully arrange the food into little dishes like the people who had arranged this banquet had done. The usual routine at Flio's house was for Rys to serve vast quantities of food on huge platters and to distribute the food at the table itself.

I see... Rys thought. *So one can serve food this way as well, I suppose. I've never seen such dainty arrangements in any restaurant in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Perhaps I should use this as inspiration...* After studying the spread closely, she took one of the dishes and tried a bite, turning it over carefully in her mouth to observe the flavor.

Flio, who had noticed Rys's behavior, gently placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Your cooking is always great, Rys," he said, giving her one of his easygoing smiles. "It's all right to just enjoy the food today, if you want."

"M-My lord husband..." Rys said, beaming back at him, grateful for the consideration. "Thank you!"

Meanwhile, next to the happy couple was Wyne, who had demolished her own serving and was holding her empty tray aloft. "I want second-seconds!" she cried out.

"Y-Yes, right away!" said Itsuhachi, who had remained in the room to see to the party's needs. "I will bring you another helping right away!" With that, she ran off with a grin on her face.

"Ah ha ha!" Garyl laughed. "Still as big an eater as ever, I see!"

"Of course!" Wyne replied with a smile. "I need to eat lots-lots if I wanna have a buncha energy! You should eat lots-lots too, Gare-Gare!"

"That's right!" Garyl said, smiling back. "I've gotta be sure I get plenty of food for the big sword-fighting tournament tomorrow!"

At Garyl's words, though, Murasame suddenly went stiff. "A-Actually..." she said. "Well...um...Garyl?"

"Huh?" Garyl said. "What is it, Miss Murasame?"

"I-It's very difficult for me to say this..." Murasame said, sitting on the other side of the banquet to face Garyl and bowing deep in apology. "But the truth is...the arena where the sword-fighting tournament was meant to take place was located on the peak of Mount Gokoku..."

"Huh...?" Garyl replied, his eyes going wide with realization. A second later, so did everyone else's. "Isn't Mount Gokoku...the mountain that erupted in fire earlier today...?"

"Y-Yes, that is correct..." Murasame confirmed. "And unfortunately, the arena seems to have been blasted away in the eruption. I'm afraid tomorrow's tournament has been suspended...”

“Jeez!” Garyl exclaimed, turning his head upwards. “You're kidding me!” He sighed just once, however, and quickly regained his spirits. “Oh, well. No use crying over spilled milk! And I got to try this delicious food, so the trip was worth it as far as I'm concerned.” With that, he returned to the feast.

“U-Um...” Murasame ventured, confused. “Garyl?”

“You're not the one who ruined the arena, Miss Murasame,” Garyl told her. “Please don't worry about it.”

“Garyl...” An expression of relief came over Murasame's face.

Garyl really has grown up... Flio thought, watching the exchange with a smile. *He didn't lose his temper when he heard the tournament had been suspended at all. In fact, he's the one attending to Miss Murasame's feelings...*

They feasted late into the night, their merry voices filling the hall.

◇Land of the Rising Sun—Outside Ichimu-an◇

Outside the front entrance to the inn Ichimu-an stood a great crowd of men and women, every one of them sent by some master or other to invite Flio, the vanquisher of the Yamata Dragon, into their service.

“We knew that Flio-dono must possess tremendous strength if he was able to defeat the Divine Beast,” one of them said. “But we failed to consider that his wife, too, would have the power to overwhelm all of us...”

“But Flio-dono says he has no intention of serving any member of Hi Izuru's nobility...” pointed out another. “If that is true, our masters will surely understand. But I cannot deny that it is vexing. Most vexing indeed...”

“That goes without saying,” said a third. “I feel the same way, to be sure. But if he himself has made up his mind, there is nothing more we can do.”

“Still...” one of them said, turning to look in the direction of Mount Gokoku. “The real loss in all of this is the arena that was destroyed when the Divine Beast appeared. Because of that, they were forced to suspend tomorrow's sword-fighting tournament...”

“Quite right,” another agreed. “That tournament was meant to determine the hierarchy among all the many noble houses. And moreover, it seems the son of our Flio-dono was meant to participate as well. Perhaps we could have been able to scout the son, depending on the result of the tournament...”

The retainers looked up at Mount Gokoku as the topic of the conversation turned. “But I wonder...” one said. “Why would Mount Gokoku have suddenly burst into flames? I had heard no indication that the seal had been growing weaker...”

“Indeed...” another agreed. “Although it may be possible, if one were to dig into the underground cave where the Yamata Dragon was sealed, for the flames within to erupt out through the hole...”

“No, no, no, that would be simply impossible!” a retainer protested. “For one thing, the cave where the Yamata Dragon was sealed should be deep underground. And besides, you would run into the barrier halfway through the mountain! You would have to break through the barrier *and* dig a hole deep enough to reach the depths of the earth! I can’t imagine how anyone would accomplish that unless they had some sort of legendary item...”

Chapter 3: Hole — Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

◇Somewhere—A Tavern◇

That night, Hero Gold-Hair and his companions were enjoying a round of drinks at a tavern in a village somewhere in the world.

“Ha ha ha!” Hero Gold-Hair laughed, holding high his tankard, filled to the brim. “Alcohol is wonderful, I tell you! It’s true what they say—liquor is the best medicine!”

Next to him was Aryun Keats, staring up at the sky as she slumped back in her chair, three empty bottles dangling from her mouth. “I-I couldn’t drink another drop...” she whined.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha!” Wuha Gappoli laughed in amusement, smacking Aryun Keat’s hefty chest from the seat beside her. “Aryun, you’re such a lightweight!” Each time Wuha stuck Aryun Keat’s chest her breasts would wobble gloriously, drawing no shortage of sidelong looks from the surrounding men.

“Tee hee hee!” Valentine giggled, stuffing her face with an enormous helping of meat and washing it down with alcohol. She seemed to be in a very good mood. “Eating with all of you really is such a lovely way to pass the time!” The other patrons in the tavern gazed in awe at the slender woman’s boisterous spirits and heroic appetite.

“Alcohol is wonderful...” Riliangiu agreed, her cheeks turning red as she drained her glass. “There is nothing that does a better job of knocking out a day’s fatigue.”

“That’s right!” said Hero Gold-Hair, grinning as he clapped a hand on Riliangiu’s shoulder. “And you’re always a big help, Riliangiu, scouting ahead for us day in and day out. So drink up! Don’t hold back!” He poured more liquor as he spoke, refilling Riliangiu’s empty glass.

“There is no greater joy than hearing you speak highly of my services,” said Riliangiu, grinning widely in delight at Hero Gold-

Hair's words as she went to drain her glass once again.

"Hee hee hee!" Tsuya smiled happily as she drank her own glass dry. "We have looots of money, so no need to worry about paaaying today! Hee hee hee! I'll drink a lot toooo!"

"Of course!" Hero Gold-Hair nodded. "You're always tiring yourself out with this and that, Tsuya. Today's the time to forget all of that and drink yourself stupid!" *Still...* he thought to himself. *Today's job was a bit strange, wasn't it? Digging a hole down from the top of a mountain is simple enough, but then there was that weird barrier partway down... Not that it was any problem for me and my legendary item, the Drilldozer Shovel!* He finished off his own drink as he mulled the matter over in his mind. *They're paying a decent bit of money, though. Perhaps I shouldn't let it bother me...*

Hero Gold-Hair's party kept drinking and chatting boisterously through the night, until it was nearly dawn...

◇The Following Morning◇

"What did you just say...?" Hero Gold-Hair's eyes went wide as he heard what the tavern's proprietor had to say. Behind him the rest of his party stood on teetering legs, satisfied smiles on their faces from their long night of drinking and eating up a storm.

The proprietor furrowed his brow as he looked over the coins he had received from Hero Gold-Hair. "Yes, well..." he said, whispering in Hero Gold-Hair's ear to prevent the other customers from listening in. "I really am terribly sorry to have to tell you this, but these coins you've given me all seem to be nothing but well-made forgeries..."

"I-It can't...be..." Hero Gold-Hair's eyes opened wider still. Tsuya, who was standing next to him, went motionless, her expression identical to his.

"So..." the proprietor said, glancing between Tsuya and Hero Gold-Hair. "Perhaps you have some other coins you could provide as payment...?" He rubbed his hands together, sidling up closer.

Hero Gold-Hair turned his eyes to look in Tsuya's direction without moving his head. "*Do we have any other money?*" he asked, communicating using only the movement of his eyeballs.

Tsuya, who was fully fluent in Hero Gold-Hair's looks, slowly and deliberately brought her black eyes to dead center. A flat "no." She looked like she might burst into tears at any second.

Hero Gold-Hair turned his gaze back towards the proprietor of the establishment. “Y-Yes, well, you see, my good tavernkeep... Hang on, just a moment.” He reached back and grabbed Wuha Gappoli, who had been standing directly behind him, by the shoulder.

“Huh?” Wuha asked. “Hero Gold-Hair? Whassup?” Drunk out of her mind, she glanced over at Flio’s hand on her shoulder with languid eyes.

“I’m sorry about this, tavernkeep,” Hero Gold-Hair said. “But I promise you—I *will* pay today’s tab! In the meantime, why don’t you put this one to work and let the rest of us go?!”

The words had hardly left Hero Gold-Hair’s mouth before he fled the scene, leaving Wuha Gappoli behind. Tsuya, Riliangiu, and Valentine, carrying Aryun Keats on her back, followed closely after.

“Fwah?!” Wuha Gappoli cried in distress at finding herself abandoned. “H-Hero Gold-Hair! Wait!”

“Hah...” the tavern’s proprietor sighed. “Well, I suppose if they’re leaving one of them here, I’ll let it slide for now...” He gave Wuha Gappoli a hearty smack on the back. “So, now that that’s settled, let’s get you washing dishes until those friends of yours get back!”

“Huh? Huh? W-Wait! Hang on, just a moment!” Wuha pleaded, tears of distress welling up in her eyes.

The rest of Hero Gold-Hair’s party ran out of the tavern for all they were worth. “Now that I think about it, I had been thinking that client’s jobs paid suspiciously well...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered through gritted teeth, his eyes narrowed in anger. “To think they were paying us with counterfeit coins this whole time!”

The party, minus Wuha, made it safely out of the village and vanished from sight.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few hours after throwing Wuha to the wolves, the rest of Hero Gold-Hair’s party convened at the base of a towering tree deep in the forest.

Hero Gold-Hair furrowed his brow. “Wizard gold?” he said, repeating the phrase Riliangiu had used.

“Indeed...” Riliangiu confirmed. “According to the information I gathered from the surrounding villages, there has been a recent rash of counterfeit coins in the nearby towns, so well-made as to be nearly impossible to distinguish from genuine currency. It seems people have taken to calling them ‘wizard gold.’ I can only surmise that the coins we received from our employer were these same counterfeits.”

“So?” Hero Gold-Hair asked, folding his arms. “Did you figure out where this wizard gold is coming from?”

Riliangiu frowned. “The ones commissioning work and paying people using the wizard gold all seem to be contracted intermediaries…” she said. “However, I did manage to find one promising lead.”

“A promising lead?”

“Yes. I spoke with someone who said they saw the intermediaries in question entering Castolia, a small kingdom neighboring the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.”

“Hmm…Castolia, is it?” Hero Gold-Hair rested his chin in his hand, mulling the situation over. “Well, I suppose there’s no use in sitting here thinking about it. We’d better hurry to the Kingdom of Castolia, expose whoever’s behind this wizard gold nonsense, and make them compensate us for our labor with proper legal currency!” He gave a single, decisive nod over his folded arms. “After all, it sounds like we’re not the only ones who’ve been victimized in all this…”

◇ ◇ ◇

The party traveled along the road in the carriage djinn Aryun Keat’s transformed body. Hero Gold-Hair himself sat inside Aryun’s carriage compartment with his arms folded, listening to Riliangiu’s report.

“I have confirmed that the same group who gave us the job to dig the hole in that island nation to the east yesterday have been spotted entering the Kingdom of Castolia,” Riliangiu said.

“Hmm…” Hero Gold-Hair hemmed in thought, glancing down at the bag of wizard gold lying at his feet on the carriage floor. “If this client of ours is in Castolia, I suppose we can’t assume they mistakenly paid us in wizard gold…”

Riliangiu nodded in agreement. “I mobilized all of my mantis familiars to investigate this case. They tell me there have been many reports of people being paid in wizard gold recently in this region...and every single one of these cases leads back to Castolia."

Hero Gold-Hair mulled over Riliangiu's words for a moment before speaking, keeping his arms folded stoically over his chest. "Riliangiu," he said, "If I'm remembering right, didn't you tell me the king of Castolia or whoever died some time ago? In that case, who would be creating the wizard gold?"

"It seems there is a certain noble that gained influence just as King Castolia passed away," Riliangiu explained. "They had been raised to nobility by the late king only very recently, and rumor has it they have been spending considerable sums of money left and right behind the scenes in order to secure their current position."

"I see..." Hero Gold-Hair nodded. "So they may be using wizard gold..."

Tsuya smiled brightly in her seat next to Hero Gold-Hair. "So aaall we need to dooo is fiiind these nobles and get them to exchange our wiiizard gold for the reaaal stuff!"

"That's the long and short of it, I suppose..." Hero Gold-Hair said, turning his head to look out the window. *Well,* he thought, *maybe the straightforward approach would cause the least headache...*

Just then, however, someone came right up beside Aryun Keats's carriage form—a girl riding on horseback galloping along the road as fast as she could go.

"What?!" Hero Gold-Hair, who had been looking out the window, exclaimed in surprise.

The girl rode fast, passing Aryun by as a group of centaur men came pursuing her from behind. The centaurs were dressed in armor, and they raced along the road at an astonishing pace.

"Those centaurs are firing arrows, aren't they?!" Valentine cried in astonishment, leaning out of the window to get a better look as the centaurs ran down the road ahead of them. "Of all the absurdly dangerous things!"

"Keats!" Hero Gold-Hair barked. "Follow those centaurs!"

"*Alas, there's no way for me to catch them at that speed...*" Aryun Keats reported. "*Unless I do* this!" Suddenly, a hatch opened on the rear of the carriage, producing a smaller carriage fastened by a rope with an oddly lascivious moan. "*Ahnnhh...*"

"That was...quite the noise, Keats..." Hero Gold-Hair said. "Where in the hells did that carriage come from anyway?"

"*Th-That's...*" Aryun said. "*A-Ahem! What I mean is, never mind the details! Now, get in that Compact High-Speed Carriage and chase* *after those centaurs!*”

“R-Right, got it!” Hero Gold-Hair said, entering the smaller carriage.

“*The Compact High-Speed Carriage is a part of myself optimized for mobility,*” Aryun explained. “*At the foot of the driver’s seat you will find an acceleration pedal. Step on that to speed up. You can use the reins to steer it left and right!*”

“I-I see,” Hero Gold-Hair said. “I think I get the gist of it anyway.” As Aryun explained the controls, he settled into the driver’s seat, took the reins tight in both hands, and pressed down on the acceleration pedal. The compact carriage took off, quickly passing Aryun Keat’s main body, hot on the hooves of the centaurs.

This is pretty fast all right! Hero Gold-Hair thought, pressing the accelerator pedal down still farther. The carriage sped up, and soon he could see the centaurs from earlier ahead on the road.

Just then, Hero Gold-Hair felt a sudden sense of unease. “By the way, Keats...” he ventured. “How do you stop this Compact High-Speed Carriage of yours anyway?”

“*By crashing it into something!*” came Aryun Keats’s response.

“Excuse me?” Hero Gold-Hair blinked in confusion. “Keats, I’m not sure I heard you right. *How* do you stop this thing?”

“*Just as I told you!*” Aryun said, her telepathic voice sounding oddly smug. “*I designed the Compact High-Speed Carriage for speed and nothing else. Consequently, I did not include any extraneous parts that might hinder its acceleration. A breaking mechanism would only get in the way of moving as fast as possible, so I left it out! Those fools at the academy would never understand its brilliance!*”

“You imbecile!” Hero Gold-Hair bellowed. “Stick with the academy on this one!” Despite his protests, however, he had already picked up a considerable amount of speed. Soon, he was out of sight of Aryun Keats’s main body.

The rest of the party watched as Hero Gold-Hair vanished into the distance. “A-Aryun...” Valentine said, nervous sweat forming on her brow. “Is Hero Gold-Hair going to be all right?”

“*He’ll be just fine!*” Aryun replied, voice full of confidence. “*No matter what should befall my Compact High-Speed Carriage, once I retrieve it, it will be completely restored within two hours!*”

“I honestly don’t care in the slightest what happens to this Compact High-Speed Carriage of yours,” Valentine said, looking up at the ceiling to speak to the carriage djinn. “What I want to know is, what happens to the human *inside* the carriage when they crash it somewhere to stop the thing?”

“*Ah...*” said Aryun. After a curiously long pause, she continued. “*Ha ha ha... How silly of me! It seems I neglected to consider the person inside the carriage!*”

“What?!” Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu all sprung to their feet at Aryun’s lackadaisical response.

“H-Hero Gooold-Haaair!” Tsuya shouted, leaning out the window.

By then, however, Hero Gold-Hair was long out of sight.

◇ ◇ ◇

“M...ister...”

Hero Gold-Hair could hear a voice coming from somewhere that sounded far, far away as he slowly regained consciousness. His head still felt hazy and confused, and his body was refusing to move no matter how hard he tried, but after some time he could make out the voice clearly.

“Mister?” said the voice. “Mister, are you all right?”

“M...mngh...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted in response, slowly opening his eyes.

“Oh!” The voice’s owner—a young girl—had placed the fallen Hero Gold-Hair’s head on her lap to recover. She had been holding his hand tightly as she cried out desperately to him again and again. “Thank goodness! You’re finally awake!”

“Gh... H-How did I end up like this...?” Hero Gold-Hair tried to pull himself to his feet, only to collapse once again as intense pain shot through his entire body. “Ngh?!”

“P-Please, you mustn’t force yourself!” the girl exclaimed, pressing his head back down into her lap. “You charged the centaurs who had been pursuing me, and then you ended up falling down the cliff...”

As Hero Gold-Hair lay back down on the girl’s lap, his memories started to gradually return. He remembered getting in Aryun Keats’s Compact High-Speed Carriage and chasing after the girl on horseback. He had charged into the centaurs from behind as they pelted the girl with arrows, crying, “*if I’m going down, I’m taking you out with me!*” He had sent the centaurs flying, but without any means to stop the carriage, he careened on ahead, overtaking the girl on horseback and plummeting off a cliff.

"If you hadn't risked your own life to drive off those centaurs," the girl said, "they would have taken me back to Castle Castolia, where I am to be forced into an unwanted marriage." She bowed deeply. "I am Culbiez, first princess of Castoli— Aah?!" Just as she began introducing herself, however, First Princess Culbiez let out a scream. Suddenly, she was hoisted into the air, expelling Hero Gold-Hair from her lap and headfirst into a nearby boulder.

First Princess Culbiez was being carried into the sky in the arms of a group of hawkmen. "Come in," the leader of the hawkmen said, speaking to some unseen person using telepathic communication. "First Princess Culbiez managed to give the centaur team the slip, but we were able to recover her without incident. Hawkman brigade, returning to base."

"Mister!!!" First Princess Culbiez cried, nearly wailing as she reached out desperately for Hero Gold-Hair with her free arm. Her hand, however, found nothing but empty air, and soon both the princess and the hawkmen disappeared from sight.

"N-Ngh..." Hero Gold-Hair groaned, desperately willing his body to move in spite of the pain. As he struggled to pull himself to his feet, however, he found himself surrounded by a group of four slimes, slowly closing in.

"*Bloop*... Is this the lowlife who tried to help First Princess Culbiez get away?"

"*Blirp*... If he's interfering with our master's plans, I guess we'll have to kill him!"

"*Blap*... Prepare yourself, human!"

"*Blump*... We four slimes will wipe you out in a second!"

Confound it all! Hero Gold-Hair thought, grumbling in irritation as the slimes drew closer, cutting off his escape. *Ordinarily, a bunch of slimes would be no trouble at all... If only it weren't for these injuries!*

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in Castle Castolia, preparations for the wedding ceremony were well underway. A throng of townsfolk stood outside, whispering to each other as they looked up at the ostentatious ornamentation decorating the castle for the occasion.

"So it's a marriage between First Princess Culbiez, daughter of the late King Castolia, and Lord D'arkness, a noble who was selected to be the former king's right-hand aide…"

"Didn't Lord D'arkness start out as just another low-ranking noble?"

"That's right…and they say his influence in the court grew suddenly right as King Castolia passed away…"

"All the rumors say he gained his position using some kind of suspicious money…"

"So he became the most powerful person in the kingdom thanks to the power of ill-gotten funds?"

"Poor First Princess Culbiez…She's meant to take the throne after what happened to her father, but she's only just reached the age of adulthood, hasn't she?"

"Lord D'arkness only seems to care about money…and there's something off about those people he surrounds himself with…"

"You mean that pompous man who's always smoking a cigar and those two women in cheongsams and gaudy makeup?"

"They say all these cases of counterfeit coins started around the same time the three of them started showing up at Lord D'arkness's manor…"

"Shhh! Watch what you say! You never know when Lord D'arkness's guards are listening…"

A carriage came down the road leading to Castle Castolia, past the gossiping crowd. It came to a stop, and who should exit but the vampire Zarmas. "So thiz iz to be the zite of my next zecurity job…" she said as she dismounted from the carriage.

Zarmas was the aide of Yorminyt, current headmaster of the Houghtow College of Magic and former member of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. Most recently she had been charged with establishing and running a security company as a place for students to find employment after graduation—Nyt Security Incorporated.

Work iz work, but I cannot help feeling a little unmotivated when it comez to thiz particular caze… Zarmas thought as she gazed up at Castle Castolia. She dutifully struck the whip she was carrying against the ground with a loud *snap*, however, signaling for the members of Nyt Security Incorporated to assemble behind her. They saluted smartly.

"All members accounted for, Madame Zarmas!" one of the security detail members reported.

"Excellent," Zarmas said. "You are to head at once to your assigned dormitoriez, where you will depozit your luggage, do what preperationz you need, and ztand by ready to patrol. I will go report our arrival and zee what I can learn about the detailz of our zecurity mizzion."

"Yes, ma'am!" The company gave a spirited response and moved out, wasting no time in finding their rooms. Zarmas watched as they left and made her way into the castle, her high heels clacking on the pavement as she walked.

◇Castle Castolia—Detached Room◇

Overlooking the Castle Castolia stood a tower, isolated from the rest of the building and impossible to reach without passing over a drawbridge. Lord D'arkness stood in a room at the very top of the tower, First Princess Culbiez sleeping soundly on the bed before him. She showed no sign of stirring anytime soon—it seemed she had been put into an enchanted slumber using some sort of sleep magic.

"My, but things have come along quite nicely, haven't they?" Lord D'arkness said, leering lasciviously at the sleeping maiden. "And to think, we owe it all to my silver tongue and the power of the wizard gold!"

"Hah! Don't delude yourself!" A heavyset man strolled into the room, waving a cigar as he spoke, flanked by two women wearing matching gold and silver cheongsams.

"That's right!" the women in the gold cheongsam yipped. "You would never have been able to become king of Castolia without the help of the Shadow King and the demon fox sisters!"

"You couldn't have made all that wizard gold without us!" the woman in the silver cheongsam agreed. "And how would you have gained so much influence in such a short period of time if we hadn't been there?"

The Shadow King and the demon fox sisters seemed quite confident—the three of them all wore nearly identical haughty grins.

"I understand perfectly well, I assure you!" Lord D'arkness said, turning an unsettling smile on the three newcomers. "Why, if it wasn't for your assistance, I could have never obtained so much influence in this land in such a short period of time! And to think that I, who once wielded power as a member of the Dark Army, will sit on the throne of a kingdom—to rule as a human! Truly, I never could have imagined such a thing!” He turned back to look at First Princess Culbiez, laughing under his breath, when he received a telepathic communication.

“*Lord D’arkness.*” It was Djorno, Lord D’arkness’s trusted minion, who was currently at work in the castle.

“Yes? What is it?”

“*Nyt Security Incorporated, the security firm we hired, has arrived. Their leader wishes to arrange a meeting with you, Lord D’arkness.*”

“Very well, tell them I am on my way!” Lord D’arkness said. Before he left, though, he brought his face up close to First Princess Culbiez’s, grinning lewdly as he examined her up close. *How sad, to think this poor girl is going to have an unforeseen accident right after I ascend the throne...* he thought. *I must make sure to enjoy her thoroughly before then! There really is nothing quite so stimulating as drinking the lifeblood of a virgin...*

Leering as unsettlingly as ever, Lord D’arkness left the room through its only exit, followed by the Shadow King and the demon fox sisters. The drawbridge was raised, and once again the tower was isolated from the rest of the castle. Inside, First Princess Culbiez slept on...

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Hero Gold-Hair heaved ragged breaths as he clutched his legendary Drilldozer Shovel, legendary item tightly. Before him was a field of freshly dug pitfall traps. The slimes who had been menacing him had fallen to their ignominious defeat.

Moments ago Hero Gold-Hair had been struggling to move his bodies thanks to his injuries from the fall as the slimes closed in. “*Blirp... Now, say your prayers!*” said one, and all four leaped at him at once. That very moment, however, Hero Gold-Hair managed to produce his trusty shovel from his Bottomless Bag.

“Nrh!” With a grunt of effort, Hero Gold-Hair began furiously digging hole after hole in every direction all around him. In just a split second, the slimes found themselves hurdling straight towards the traps, unable to dodge in midair. They cried out as they plummeted to their doom.

“*Bloop...* What?!”

“*Blirp...* How?!”

“*Blap...* Why?!”

"*Blump*... When?!"

"Take that, you idiots!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted, propping his body up using the Drilldozer Shovel. "The word 'defeat' isn't in my vocabulary—not as long as I have my partner in my hands!"

Just then, the rest of Hero Gold-Hair's party came running, Valentine at their head. "Hero Gold-Hair!" she cried. Aryun Keats was in the rear, still in her carriage form. It seemed like Valentine and the others had come rushing out when they saw Hero Gold-Hair was safe.

"Valentine! Where were you a moment ago?" Hero Gold-Hair said, doing his best to keep a brave face even as he struggled for breath. "Not that I wasn't more than enough to handle small fry like that on my own, mind you..."

Valentine ran up to Hero Gold-Hair and pulled him into a tight embrace. "That's quite enough!" she said, her voice cracking as if she might start crying at any moment. "You shouldn't push yourself to act tough with injuries like that! Are you really, really all right?"

"M-Mgrf!" Hero Gold-Hair protested, his face smothered between Valentine's voluptuous breasts. *I-I* was *all right!* he thought. *B-But now I can't breathe! I'm going to suffocate at this rate!* He waved his arms desperately as he struggled for breath, but Valentine, who hadn't noticed his predicament at all, only hugged him tighter.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the end, it was Tsuya who noticed that Hero Gold-Hair couldn't breathe, narrowly saving him from the brink of death.

"H-Hero Gold-Hair, I'm so terribly sorry!" Valentine said as the man coughed violently, clutching at his chest. "I was so worried about you I must have forgotten myself!"

"N-Never mind that!" Hero Gold-Hair said, walking up to Aryun Keats. "We have to hurry!"

"Hurry?" asked Valentine, chasing after him. "But where to?"

"Good question..." Hero Gold-Hair said, mulling it over. "For now, let's start with Castle Castolia!"

◇ ◇ ◇

Beneath its festive decorations, Castle Castolia was in a state of high alert, the regular castle guard supplemented by mercenary security forces from lands near and far.

Zarmas from Nyt Security Incorporated led her team on patrol around the perimeter of the castle gate at a fast clip, the other members following behind in double file. Wearing a formal maid's outfit, she walked with military stiffness at the group's head.

Ztill... Zarmas thought to herself. *Thiz really iz an abnormal level of zecurity. And that Lord D'arknezz might have hidden hiz face and concealed hiz prezence, but that waz unmistakably the aura of a demon...* Zarmas had met Lord D'arkness in one of the parlors when she first arrived in the castle, but he had insisted on wearing a mask the entire time, never once letting Zarmas see even a peek of his face.

As they marched along, Zarmas glanced up at the castle. Then she noticed something coming from the sky—an unidentified silhouette. "Full halt!" she ordered, raising her hand to indicate for the team to stop. She looked up, straining her eyes to follow the silhouette as it flew towards the detached tower separated from the rest of the building by a drawbridge...

◇ ◇ ◇

"Keats!" Hero Gold-Hair bellowed, almost shrieking as the pointy carriage-like contraption he was riding on sailed through the air towards Castle Castolia. "Are you sure this thing is going to get us into that tower?!"

"*Absolutely!*" came Aryun Keat's telepathic voice. "*Your trajectory and altitude are both on course! The Detached Landing and Penetration Craft will be impacting the tower momentarily!*"

"I-Impact?!" Hero Gold-Hair asked. "What is this, a cannonball?!"

"*You could call it that, in a manner of speaking...*" Aryun Keats confirmed. "*Oh! But Hero Gold-Hair, never mind that!*"

"N-Never mind?! This is an emergency!"

"*Brace for impaaact!*" Aryun sang.

"What?!"

"*Now!*"

Crash! Just as Aryun Keats said the word "now," the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft collided with the tower where First Princess Culbiez was being held prisoner, smashing its way inside.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Wh-What in the world...?” Culbiez opened her eyes and sat up in the bed she had been laid in, finally awoken as the silence of the chamber was broken by an earsplitting crash. She looked to see a section of the wall had been broken through, the sharp tip of some strange object poking in from outside.

“*I am opening the exit now!”* said Aryun Keats’s voice. Culbiez could only watch on in astonishment as the thing opened up like a hatch, revealing none other than Hero Gold-Hair.

“I swear...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered, wincing in pain and shaking his head as he extricated himself from the seat. “If it wasn’t for this Safety Belt thingamajig, that landing could have gotten ugly fast...”

“M-Mister...” First Princess Culbiez said, timidly approaching Hero Gold-Hair. “You are the kindly man who rescued me on the road earlier, are you not?”

“That’s right,” said Hero Gold-Hair, smiling when he saw Culbiez unharmed. “I may not know the first thing about you, but I wouldn’t have been able to sleep at night if I let someone get snatched away right under my nose!”

“Th-Then...you came here to save me?” For a moment, Culbiez looked stunned by Hero Gold-Hair’s words. Then she stepped forward, offering her rescuer her hand.

They were interrupted, however, by Zarmas. Zarmas had seen Aryun Keats’s Detached Landing and Penetration Craft flying into the tower and ran straight up the wall, stabbing the high heels of her shoes into the masonry in order to scale the sheer surface. “Ztop right there!” she said, bursting into the room. She regarded Hero Gold-Hair and Culbiez with an icy glare, striking her black whip on the tower floor. “I’ve zeen you zomewhere before, haven’t I? Well, no matter. I took the mizzion to provide zecurity for thiz wedding in the name of Lady Yorminyt. All intuderz muzt be apprehended at once!”

Culbiez, however, darted in front of Hero Gold-Hair. She spread her arms wide, protecting him from Zarmas.

“Your Highnezz...” Zarmas said, coolly adjusting her glasses. “What iz the meaning of thiz?”

“I beg of you!” Culbiez pleaded, refusing to stand down. “Spare this man! He is only here to rescue me from Lord D’arkness!”

“He iz...protecting you from Lord D’arknezz?” Zarmas asked, raising a single eyebrow.

Suddenly, a flurry of arrows came shooting into the room from outside, aimed for Hero Gold-Hair and Zarmas alike.

“Ngh!” Hero Gold-Hair cried.

“Zha!” exclaimed Zarmas.

The two barely managed to dodge the attack, and looked out of the tower’s window to see a large force of hawkmen, bows in hand. They must have arrived while Zarmas and Hero Gold-Hair had been occupied with each other.

Hero Gold-Hair scooped up Culbiez in his arms and dived under the bed. “You! Get under here!” he shouted, turning towards Zarmas.

Zarmas, however, defiantly struck her whip against the floor. “Prepozterouz!” she declared. “I am in charge of zecurity for thiz—”

“Quit your yapping!” Hero Gold-Hair seized Zarmas by the leg and pulled her under the bed by force. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“H-How dare you!” Zarmas sputtered, hastily fixing her skirt, which had been pulled up in Hero Gold-Hair’s effort to drag her to safety, exposing her undergarments for the world to see. “Thiz izn’t an appropriate way to rezcue zomeone at all!”

Hero Gold-Hair, however, dismissed Zarmas’s protests with a wave of his hand. “We need to get back in the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft!” he barked, pointing towards the pointy object that had wedged itself in the tower wall from outside. “As long as we can make it in there, we’ll manage one way or another.”

“Fine!” Zarmas spat, clearly chagrined. “For the time being, at leazt, I will work with you.”

Hero Gold-Hair nodded. He waited for a moment when the barrage of arrows dwindled ever so slightly. “On three!” he said. “One...two...three!” When he said the word “three,” he burst out from under the bed, followed closely by Culbiez and Zarmas. This time, however, they were met by a blast of magic bullets from the direction of the tower’s door. Hero Gold-Hair had been so focused on the arrows coming from the window that he was unable to dodge, taking a number of the projectiles straight to the chest. “Gah!” he cried, coughing up blood as he collapsed to the floor.

“Mister!” shrieked Culbiez, running to Hero Gold-Hair’s side only to be scooped up in the arms of Lord D’arkness, who came bursting into the room.

“This way, my darling beloved wife!” he said, effortlessly carrying her out of the room.

“No!” Culbiez cried. “Unhand me, you fiend! Mister, help!”

Soon, however, Lord D’arkness was out of the door, his escape covered by a group of his own personal guards who came flooding into the room armed with magic guns. “First Princess Culbiez is safe in my arms,” he declared. “Now, see to it that these two loathsome thieves who dared infiltrate my castle never leave this room!”

Zarmas’s expression grew even colder at Lord D’arkness’s words. “You dare to treat *me* az a common thief?!” she scoffed, lashing out with her whip and striking the guards’ firearms out of their hands. The guards faltered, and Zarmas wasted no time in dragging Hero Gold-Hair’s prone body into Aryun’s Detached Landing and Penetration Craft. As soon as Hero Gold-Hair was safely inside, the hatch began to close automatically.

“*Entering forced recovery mode!*” said Aryun Keats’s voice. “*Please seat yourself quickly and attach your Safety Belt to*—”

Clang! Aryun Keats was cut off as something violently impacted the outside of the vessel.

“Wh-What iz it *thiz* time?!” Zarmas demanded, falling into the cockpit still holding Hero Gold-Hair in her arms.

Outside, Lord D’arkness celebrated gleefully. “Excellent!” he said. “Just one more should do the trick!” Three more soldiers had entered the room beside him, carrying an enormous magic bazooka between them. The thing took all three of them to use properly, but they scored a direct hit, leaving a large dent on the body of the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft. A fiendish smile flickered over Lord D’arkness’s face as he watched.

“I yield!” Culbiez pleaded in Lord D’arkness’s arms, looking up at him with desperation. “You may make me your wife, or whatever else you like! I won’t run away any longer! Just please—let him live!”

Lord D’arkness, however, just leered wickedly at her request. “But of course I won’t!” he said. “You were already set to be my wife, after all! And as for these souls who dare stand in my way, I am afraid they deserve nothing but a miserable death!” He waved his hand, giving a signal for the guards to fire the oversized magic bazooka once again at point-blank range right at the vehicle’s cockpit, inflicting yet another large dent. He clicked his tongue. “The nerve of this contraption! Surely we should have blasted a hole in it by now! Well, nothing for it but to fire another round!”

The guards readied the bazooka once more on Lord D'arkness's command, pouring their magic into the device to power another shot when their target began to slide out of the wall right before their eyes, making a low rumbling sound as it detached and plummeted down to the earth below.

"Mister!" Culbiez cried, extending her arm in the direction of the falling craft. Held fast in Lord D'arkness's arms, however, there was nothing she could do.

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"I can't reach the zeat!" Zarmas cried, still carrying Hero Gold-Hair as she struggled for all she was worth to try to secure herself in the chair. With the vehicle in free fall, however, she was having difficulty maneuvering her body.

"*Passengers unsecured...*" Aryun Keats's voice rang out inside the landing craft. "*However, due to the ongoing emergency, we will be commencing operations regardless! Shifting to Evacuation Mode! Both of you, find something to grab hold of and brace yourselves!*"

They hardly had a second to follow Aryun's instructions before the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft began emitting compressed magic energy from its rear, sending the thing flying off to gods know where.

"Kh!" Zarmas did her best to cling to one of the handrails, but the force of the acceleration sent both her and Hero Gold-Hair tumbling chaotically around inside the cockpit as they flew away into the sky.

"Don't let them get away! Shoot them down! Quickly!" Lord D'arkness ordered. Once again, the three mages hefted the magic bazooka and took aim at the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft, switching their weapon to automatic homing mode.

The bolt of energy flew in a curved line, unerringly seeking its target until it found its mark, exploding with a loud *Kaboom!* and sending the broken pieces of the Detached Landing and Penetration Craft flying every which way.

"M-Mister...!" Culbiez shrieked as she watched helplessly from Lord D'arkness's arms, and fainted dead away.

◇ ◇ ◇

In a forest, not far from where the Detached Landing and

Penetration Craft had exploded in midair, Valentine and the others stood on top of Aryun Keats's carriage form, staring up at the sky. "There he is!" Valentine exclaimed, catching sight of Zarmas and Hero Gold-Hair as they were sent flying from the blast. "Allow me!" She quickly determined the trajectory of Hero Gold-Hair's body and began releasing threads of darkness from her fingertips, blanketing the area around Aryun Keats in a net. Her calculations, it happened, were exactly correct—Hero Gold-Hair fell right into the middle.

"Amaaazing, Lady Valentine!" Tsuya gasped in admiration. "That was dead ceeenter!"

"Hee hee!" Valentine laughed, a smug grin coming over her face. "That was nothing! Easy as pie!"

"*We shouldn't waste time!*" said Aryun Keats, accelerating quickly. "*Now that we've recovered Sir Hero Gold-Hair, we should make our escape at once!*"

As for Zarmas, well, she was quite a bit lighter than Hero Gold-Hair and overshot Valentine's net considerably, landing somewhere in the middle of the forest.

◇ ◇ ◇

Aryun Keats drove as fast as she could along the road until they came to an inconspicuous shed they could hide in at the city's outskirts. Valentine made an impromptu bed out of her threads of darkness and laid Hero Gold-Hair down to rest. For a while, everyone stood watch over his unconscious body.

At long last, Hero Gold-Hair opened his eyes. "Where...are we?" he asked, looking all around.

"Hero Gooold-Hair?!" cried Tsuya, who had been staring directly at Hero Gold-Hair's face when he awakened. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Everyooone! Hero Gooold-Hair is awaaake!"

"Hero Gold-Hair!"

"Sir Hero Gold-Hair!"

Everyone came rushing up at once, Valentine at their head.

"Hero Gooold-Haaaair!" Tsuya wailed, sobbing messy tears and sniffling as she clung to Hero Gold-Hair's chest. "I'm sooo glaaad! I was suuure you were deeead!"

Valentine and Riliangiu, for their parts, were crying their eyes out every as much as Tsuya.

"H-Hang on!" Hero Gold-Hair pleaded. "Tsuya, wait!" His chest had been wrapped in bandages where he had taken a direct hit from Lord D'arkness's magic missiles—right where Tsuya was now thoughtlessly pressing her face, sending searing pain through Hero Gold-Hair's entire body.

"Hero Gooold-Haaair!!!" Tsuya cried.

"Stop it!" Hero Gold-Hair pleaded. "Calm down! Calm down, I'm telling you!"

◇A Short While Later◇

"A-A-Are you okaaay, Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya asked when she finally calmed down.

"Yes, yes," Hero Gold-Hair answered with a grimace. "It's just a bit of (excruciating) pain, no big deal."

"Umm..." Tsuya started. "Is it just meee, or did you slip some of your reeeal thoughts in between words there?"

"Never mind that! We have bigger fish to fry!" Hero Gold-Hair said, turning to Riliangiu. "Riliangiu, am I correct in thinking the wedding between Culbiez and D'arkness is going to be held tomorrow?"

"I believe so," Riliangiu answered. "The invited dignitaries from neighboring lands have been arriving in the country in a steady stream all throughout the day. Moreover, the security Sir Hero Gold-Hair encountered when he infiltrated Castle Castolia was much heavier than it had been in the past. I am afraid it may be impossible to reach the room where they are holding First Princess Culbiez under the current circumstances..." Riliangiu produced a map of Castle Castolia she had obtained in secret and pointed out the red Xs that had been printed all over the map, indicating where guards had been dispatched. There truly was a great number of them.

"Hmm..." Hero Gold-Hair crossed his arms in thought. "If only they were keeping her somewhere underground...I'd be able to use the Drilldozer Shovel to get her out in a flash!"

"Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya asked, taking a long glance at his expression. "Do we reeeally gotta do all this juuust to save First Princess Culbiiiez? I thought we came here to get wiiizard gold changed for nooormal gold. If we could prooove Castooolia was the one making the wiiizard gold, we could get a leeeg up in negotiations! I'm suuure they'd haaate to have a big scaaandal right when so many people from ooother countries are paying attention...”

Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “You’re right, Tsuya. Our goal here is to exchange this wizard gold for the genuine article. But...even so, I can’t just stand by and watch quietly as this girl goes off to a life of misery! What would my fans think of Hero Gold-Hair *then*?!” His mind made up, he turned to look over Riliangiu’s map of Castle Castolia.

“You really are diiifficult sometimes...” Tsuya said, her cheeks flushing pink as she watched Hero Gold-Hair pore over the map, a serious expression on her face. “But I guuuess that’s what makes Hero Gooold-Hair Hero Gooold-Hair!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Hero Gold-Hair and company pored over the map, discussing potential stratagems. Alas, none of them could come up with a sufficiently brilliant idea. Just when it seemed like they might carry on strategizing to no avail forever, however, they heard a woman’s voice from the shed’s window.

“Are you in trouble, perhaps?” the woman asked.

“Who’s there?!” Hero Gold-Hair jerked his head in the direction of the window as Valentine began producing her threads of darkness and Riliangiu transformed her forearms into blades. Aryun Keats wielded a nearby bottle in both hands, while Tsuya armed herself with a convenient frying pan. Everyone, it seemed, was ready for a fight.

The girl, however, simply hopped in from the window and strolled up to Hero Gold-Hair. She wore a white mask, concealing her face, and a gothic lolita style maid outfit. “I am an information specialist in the employ of a certain individual,” she explained. “I’m afraid I cannot reveal my identity, but I will say that my employer has given me permission to offer you assistance.” At this, the mystery maid produced a single sheet of paper and handed it to Hero Gold-Hair.

It was an article clipped from a local Castolian newspaper. The headline read, “Representative from Dark Army to Attend Ceremony.”

“Hold on...” Hero Gold-Hair said, looking up from the article. “What—”

The woman, however, was already gone.

◇ ◇ ◇

Inside the bounds of Castle Castolia, there stood a solitary lodging house. At that moment, the building was surrounded by guards dispatched from the Castolian army, equipped with magic guns and other such deadly devices. It was being watched so carefully that even an ant would find itself hard-pressed to sneak inside.

Zarmas sat in one of the lodging house's rooms. She and the members of Nyt Security Incorporated who had accompanied her to Castolia had found themselves trapped here, surrounded by enemies. They were being kept prisoner under the pretext that Zarmas had assisted Hero Gold-Hair in an attempt to kidnap First Princess Culbiez.

"You certainly have made a nuisance of yourself, haven't you, Miss Zarmas?" the woman in the gold cheongsam said with a cunning smirk. "Or should I address you as Helzarmas the vampire?"

"What are the demon fox zizterz doing here?" Zarmas demanded. She was sitting up in bed, too injured to move, but still fixing the woman—Kintsuno the Gold, older of the two demon fox sisters—with a searching glare. "Weren't you expelled from the Dark Army? How did you end up in a pozition to give orderz to the Caztolian military?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Kintsuno asked, elegantly waving the fan she was holding. "Our boss, the Shadow King, has a business partnership with Lord D'arkness, the new king of this land."

"Then the Shadow King haz been manipulating eventz behind the scenez?" Zarmas asked.

"Correct!" Kintsuno yipped. "Are you surprised?"

"Damn right I'm zurprized," Zarmas said, looking thoroughly nonplussed. "After all of hiz failurez, I'm aztonished to learn that man iz ztill alive!"

For a moment Kintsuno's face contorted with rage, but she quickly collected herself. "Ahem! Y-Yes, yes, get your barbs in while you can. After all, once the ceremony is over, you'll be executed along with Hero Gold-Hair! Now, do be a good girl and stay put until then, won't you?" And with that she sauntered out of the room, a victorious smile on her face, casting a spell to lock the door behind her.

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“That Helzarmas...” Kintsuno muttered as she locked the door behind her. “Always looking down on us with that cool expression of hers just because she used to be the Infernal Yorminyt’s aide... But this time, there will be no escape.” A wicked smirk crossed her face as she made her way down the hall.

“Are you finished with your talk, elder sister Kintsuno?” the woman in the silver cheongsam—Gintsuno the Silver—asked, stepping up to her sister.

“Yes, everything went well,” Kintsuno answered. “What about your part in the arrangements? A little bird told me that your operation in Hi Izuru encountered some sort of trouble.”

“The plan succeeded, to a point...” Gintsuno began, “I hired a man who specialized in digging holes to dig an opening into the mountain where the Divine Beast was sealed and it appeared right on schedule. Everyone was running away in a panic, just as planned, but before I could go on to rob the treasury, the Divine Beast suddenly disappeared.”

“It disappeared? The Divine Beast?”

“That’s right! And thanks to that, I didn’t have any time for my robbery! I was forced to beat a hasty retreat...”

“I see...” Kintsuno said as she considered her sister’s report. “Well, you couldn’t have done anything about that. The Divine Beast must have grown weak during its time sealed away. I suppose the Hi Izurans were able to defeat it without much trouble...”

“Maybe...” Gintsuno replied. “I couldn’t say what happened for sure. But we’ll soon be able to make up for this loss as well, won’t we?”

“Quite right!” Kintsuno yipped, stars in her eyes as she squeezed her fist triumphantly. “With Castolian metallurgy on our side, we’ll be able to keep using wizard gold for as long as we like! If things keep going the way they have, we may soon have the whole of Klyrode under our control!”

“I’ll do my best too, Elder Sister Kintsuno!” yipped Gintsuno, squeezing her own fist tight in imitation of her sister. The two left the lodging house in high spirits, grinning all the while.

◇ ◇ ◇

Zarmas heaved a heavy sigh once Kintsuno left the room. *To think I should zee zuch villainy taking place right before my eyez, only to be trapped here with my body too hurt to move...* she thought, lying back on the bed and closing her eyes. Before long, however, she received a telepathic message from one of her subordinates.

"*Miss Zarmas.*"

"*Alune,*" Zarmas replied. "*Did you share our information with Hero Gold-Hair?*"

"*I did,*" Alune reported. "*I delivered it just as you instructed.*"

"*Excellent. Proceed az we dizcuzzed.*"

"*Yes, ma'am,*" Alune said, cutting off communication. Zarmas sensed her presence vanish from where she had been hiding underneath the floorboards.

I waz told Lord D'arknezz waz elevated to the nobility due to hiz zubztantial contributionz to public workz, Zarmas thought to herself. *But when we looked into the matter ourzelvez, it zeemz that mozt of the money he uzed to finance hiz conztruction projectz waz a type of counterfeit currency known az wizard gold. Lord D'arknezz himzelf doez not zeem to have any aptitude in forgery or in public workz, but if he haz teamed up with the Shadow King, the zituation makez a little more zenze. That man zpecializez in all zortz of wicked deedz, after all...*

Zarmas rolled over on her side, her mind racing as she lay in bed alone. *Zooner or later, other landz are zure to zend emizzariez here to inveztigate the wizard gold, but if Lord D'arknezz is king, they will have to be circumzpect. After all, the people he paid with the wizard gold were moztly fighterz who found themzelvez unemployed thankz to the peace treaty between the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army. Their word will not be zufficient proof to launch an inveztigation into another kingdom'z affairz. If that girl becomes queen, on the other hand, she will have every right to carry out a bazic inquiry into a noble of her own country and expoze Lord D'arknezz and the Shadow King's mizdeedz for the world to zee...*

◇The Following Morning◇

It was the day of the noble Lord D'arkness's wedding to First Princess Culbiez, eldest daughter of the departed king, and the roads leading to Castle Castolia were packed full of carriages heading to the ceremony. Dark One Dawkson’s minion, the succubus Phufun, glanced at the packed streets out of the corner of her eye as she traveled on foot along the side of the road. She was wearing a luxurious dress, suitable for a dignitary from a foreign power, and was accompanied by a score of harpy familiars.

“I can’t imagine why all these people would choose to ride a carriage when you can see this traffic jam from miles away,” Phufun remarked, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose. “Humans truly are a ridiculous species.”

Of course, while Phufun and her retinue were traveling on foot, in a manner of speaking, they were moving along much faster than a human could run thanks to their sustained magical flight.

I can’t believe I’m being sent to an insignificant kingdom like this, even if I am here as an emissary of Master Dawkson... Phufun thought, adjusting her glasses once again as she sped through the interminably jammed traffic. *Still, I suppose it’s worth maintaining friendly relations with this land, since they employ so many demons who lost their jobs in the Dark Army.*

Before long, Phufun reached the castle gates and made her way inside.

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Preparations for the wedding ceremony were well underway in the grand chapel inside Castle Castolia. A great number of guests had already arrived, making their way through the door to the venue where Castolian guards had set up a series of checkpoints to carefully inspect all the attendees luggage before they were allowed in. There were even more guards stationed in and around the chapel, performing their incessant patrols.

“And how are the preparations for my wedding coming along?” Lord D’arkness asked as looked down on the venue from his waiting room above the crowds, resting his chin on his hand. He regarded the room below with a perverted smile on his face.

“Don’t be impatient,” the Shadow King scolded him, puffing on his cigar as he strolled up beside Lord D’arkness. “It takes time to inspect each and every guest’s possessions for potential contraband! Now settle down and wait for the ceremony to start. We’ve come this far—what could possibly go wrong?” *And of course,* he thought to himself, chuckling under his breath, *the Shadow Conglomerate* *stands to make a pretty penny between inspection fees and security costs!*

Lord D'arkness nodded, satisfied by the Shadow King's explanation. "Very well, very well! Then perhaps, while I wait, I shall make sure everything is in order for our plans *after* the ceremony..."

"Yes, of course, our plan for First Princess Culbiez to die tragically a few short days after her marriage to Lord D'arkness," the Shadow King said. "To think she would find herself abducted for ransom by Hero Gold-Hair, the nefarious criminal wanted throughout the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! You'll find we have already selected a group of demons to play the part of Hero Gold-Hair..."

"And once the villainous Hero Gold-Hair has met his final end, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode will owe us a debt of gratitude!" Lord D'arkness gushed. "I tell you, I simply can't believe the Magical Kingdom neglected to offer me even a single word of congratulations, when I invited them to my wedding and everything. Simply terrible manners!"

"You'll simply have to content yourself with the reward money for exterminating Hero Gold-Hair, I suppose..." the Shadow King said. *Although most of the reward is going to go to paying my fees for helping set up the plan!*

The Shadow King and Lord D'arkness shared a wicked look and tossed their heads back, laughing loudly.

◇ ◇ ◇

Phufun arrived at the chapel and made her way down to the seats reserved for visiting dignitaries, surrounded on all sides by a good dozen guards who accompanied her under the pretense of security, keeping pace with her strides as she walked down the hallway, the long skirt of her dress trailing elegantly behind her. Lord D'arkness had requested her harpies stay behind in the waiting room, leaving Phufun alone.

"Excuse me," Phufun said, turning to the guards with a graceful curtsy as she made her way to a nearby restroom. "I am afraid I must make use of the facilities." The guards, needless to say, did not follow Phufun into the toilet. They waited outside the door for her to finish.

Phufun took a quick glance around to make sure she was alone and stepped inside one of the individual stalls. "You can come out now," she whispered, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose. Suddenly, something inside her skirt began to squirm about.

"You made it all the way through the security inspections? I'm impressed..." came a quiet voice from underneath her dress as Phufun turned on the sink faucet to disguise the sound of conversation from anyone listening in.

"I *am* a succubus, you know," she said. "I merely had to charm the guards performing my security inspection. In fact, they were happy to let me through."

"And the way you were able to get in without anyone searching your skirt..." Hero Gold-Hair said, emerging from Phufun's voluminous outfit. "Well, that aside, I should thank you for your help."

"Sir Hero Gold-Hair," Aryun Keats said, following Hero Gold-Hair out of Phufun's dress. She was wearing a miniskirt skimpy enough that anyone looking from behind could get a clear view of her panties, but the exposure didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. "Perhaps we could use that air vent to make our way inside!" she suggested, looking up at the stall's ceiling.

"Right, sounds like a plan," Hero Gold-Hair said. "I suppose this is where we say goodbye," he added, nodding in Phufun's direction before prying the air vent open and vanishing inside.

"It was traveling with you that finally got Master Dawkson to mend his ways," Phufun said, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose as she watched them go. "I was merely paying back a small part of that debt."

The first time Dawkson had taken power, back when he used the name Yuigarde, he had wrested the throne from his brother, Dark One Gholl. He had overestimated his own power, however, and soon found himself exhausted by the constant rebellions and desertions by the demons under his command. He had later come to hate his position as Dark One and eventually abandoned his throne, running away from the Dark Citadel. He changed his name to Dawkson and began wandering the land alone, until he met Hero Gold-Hair and began traveling with his party.

Dawkson learned many things on his journey with Hero Gold-Hair and matured considerably both as a demon and a leader, laying the foundation for his present reign as an enlightened despot.

Dawkson felt a tremendous sense of gratitude for Hero Gold-Hair, a sentiment fully shared by Phufun.

Phufun turned off the faucet and took her leave of the restroom. “My apologies for the wait,” she told the guards, keeping a straight face as if nothing at all had happened. “Now, let us continue.”

They walked on down the hallway, Phufun once again surrounded by guards as she made her way to the dignitaries’ seats.

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By now the chapel was packed full of guests, as well as reporters from neighboring kingdoms who had arrived the previous day in order to gather material to write articles about the royal wedding. They chatted noisily among themselves waiting for the ceremony to start until they heard the sound of pipe organ music filling the room. The musicians, who had been standing by for this moment, began to play, accompanied by a chorus of beautiful voices singing sacred hymns. It was all perfectly suited for a solemn and majestic ceremony.

Lord D’arkness, the groom, appeared first, wearing a traditional Castolian costume—red with black stripes, accompanied by a mask of the same color and a cape that fluttered dramatically—as he made his way down the aisle, stopping in front of the altar. Next came the bride, First Princess Culbiez, wearing a white dress. The crowd let out a gasp of admiration at the sight of her beauty, and cheers and applause soon filled the room. Culbiez stepped up next to Lord D’arkness, her face curiously expressionless.

A satisfied smile crossed Lord D’arkness at the sight of Culbiez being so obedient. *With my Dampen Emotions spell in effect, Culbiez is little more than my puppet!* he thought, looking her over head to toe like a hungry animal slavering over a slab of meat.

“Right, let’s get a start on this so-called wedding,” the priest said.

“Excuse me...?” Lord D’arkness narrowed his eyes in suspicion. No priest would speak like that at such a solemn event, after all. It was clear that something was wrong. He peered at the man’s face and did a double take, his eyes shooting open wide. “Y-You! What are *you* doing here?!”

“Excuse you indeed!” scoffed the priest—who was, in fact, Hero Gold-Hair. “We’re in the middle of a wedding! Stop looking so alarmed!” Hero Gold-Hair met Lord D’arkness’s gaze, a cocksure smile on his face. “Oh well, it’s not like it matters to me. I came all this way to wreck your ceremony, after all!”

Lord D’arkness retreated behind Culbiez, using her as a shield while he backed away from Hero Gold-Hair. “Guards!” he shouted. “Arrest this man at once! I demand it!” At his command, the armed guards stationed all around came bursting into the main hall. Culbiez, however, gave no reaction to the chaos happening around her whatsoever. She simply wandered absently, her eyes unfocused and her expression blank.

“Hm,” Hero Gold-Hair grunted. “You have her under some kind of emotional suppression spell, don’t you? Well, no matter. We can figure that part out once we get her out of here.”

“Get her out?! Don’t be absurd!” Lord D’arkness sneered with haughty pride. “How do you intend to escape from this place surrounded by my security?!” His guards ran forward to cover himself and Culbiez, surrounding Hero Gold-Hair from all sides.

“Think you can take on Hero Gold-Hair, do you?” Hero Gold-Hair scoffed, producing the Drilldozer Shovel from his magic bag and grabbing the shaft tight in both hands. “You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that!” Three guards rushed forward to apprehend him, but before they could reach him, each individual guard fell, plummeting into a pitfall that had appeared right underneath their feet.

“Wha—?!”

“The hell?!”

“Argh!”

The guards cried out as they plummeted from sight. “Wh-What’s going on?!” one of the other guards demanded, looking down at the ground in confusion. “Those holes weren’t here a second ago, were they?!”

Hero Gold-Hair, meanwhile, stood untouched in front of the crowd, the Drilldozer Shovel slung over his shoulder.

The Drilldozer Shovel was a legendary item capable of digging through everything from topsoil to bedrock in the blink of an eye. With the skill Dig and his flawless mastery of the Drilldozer Shovel, Hero Gold-Hair had simply dug dozens of pitfalls at his feet faster than the naked eye could follow. The whole thing had taken a mere tenth of a second.

“And now, it’s my turn!” Hero Gold-Hair declared, switching his grip on the Drilldozer Shovel.

“Shoot him!” bellowed the Shadow King from his seat in the second story balcony, flinging order after order. “Use magic! Whatever long-ranged attacks you have, use those! That man’s only ability is digging holes! If you keep your distance, there’s nothing he can do!” The guards in the balcony responded to his orders immediately, readying their bows and casting magic spells all aimed for Hero Gold-Hair.

“Hmph! We’ll see about that!” Hero Gold-Hair stood undaunted, facing down his attackers. Before he could act, though, the staff of Nyt Security Incorporated burst into the second floor balcony, Zarmas at their head.

“Hero Gold-Hair!” Zarmas shouted. “You are a wanted criminal in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! We, Nyt Zecurity Incorporated, shall hereby take you into cuztody!”

“Miss Zarmas, are these the bad guys?” one of her ranks asked.

“Obviouzly!” Zarmas answered. “Everyone aiming shots down on the firzt floor muzt be an underling of Hero Gold-Hair! Arrezt them all!”

“What in the devil’s name is going on?!” the Shadow King sputtered. “I had you locked in the dungeon for the crime of colluding with Hero Gold-Hair.”

Zarmas silenced the Shadow King with an icy glare. “I will do whatever I muzt to apprehend zuch a dangerouz wanted criminal!” she declared proudly.

“P-Preposterous...” muttered the Shadow King. In no time at all, the second floor balcony had fallen under the control of Nyt Security Incorporated.

“Looks like they’ve got things under control,” Hero Gold-Hair said, looking up at the scene above. “Keats! Now’s the time!”

“*Yes, sir!*” Aryun Keats replied, blasting a hole in the rear of the chapel with a single shot from her magitank form. “*It’s time to give them a show!*” Flames belched from the magitank’s turret as Aryun fired shot after shot.

“And what do you think you’re trying to hit exactly, you imbecile?” Lord D’arkness scoffed. After all, Aryun’s shots had missed all of his allies and struck the back wall of the chapel. A second later, however, the chapel wall crumbled with a clamorous sound.

“Finally!” said Valentine, charging inside the chapel from the other side of the wall. “I’d been waiting for this!” She shot her dark threads from her fingers, warping the guards up in a binding of silk.

“And take this!” Riliangiu declared, bolting past Valentine and diving into the crowd of soldiers, swinging her arm blades with deadly precision.

“Ghah!”

“Urgh!”

“Ngwoh!”

The soldiers collapsed in a heap, crying out in dismay.

“They will be all right,” Riliangiu said with a glance at the fallen guards before diving into the next group of enemies. “I struck them with the flat of my blades.”

It looks like my plan went well... Hero Gold-Hair thought, nodding with satisfaction. *Have Keats blast away the chapel wall to open a path for the others to find their way in!* “Good job, Keats!” he said, turning to the carriage djinn behind him. “Now just two or three more blasts!” When he saw the state she was in, however, Hero Gold-Hair did a double take. Aryun Keats was lying on the floor, no longer in her magitank form but reverted to her default humanoid appearance.

“Hahh...ha ha ha...” she laughed meekly. “I-I can’t... I’ve run out of magic power...”

“O-Out of magic power?!” Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed. “Surely you have enough for *one* more shot!”

“I-I overexerted myself just a little bit, I’m afraid...” Aryun Keats said. “I put all the magic power I could into those shots, after all...” She certainly looked the part—she was lying facedown on the floor, her body twitching. Meanwhile, ever more guards were flooding into the room.

“S-Stooop!” Tsuya wailed, swinging a pair of frying pans wildly at any guards who drew close. “Stay baaack!” Between her weak-kneed posture and her tear-filled eyes, however, none of her adversaries seemed especially intimidated.

“Hang on...” one of them said. “This one’s a weakling, isn’t she?”

“You’re right!” another replied. “Should be easy enough to arrest her, then...”

Looking distinctly relieved, the guards moved to surround Tsuya and Aryun Keats.

Suddenly, the woman in the blank white mask and the gothic lolita maid outfit appeared right beside Tsuya. “What a handful this has turned out to be...” she said. “For certain reasons I am afraid I cannot reveal my name, but I am here to assist you on my master’s orders.” Then, without further ado, she launched a series of devastating kicks at the incoming guards.

“Oof!”

“Geh!”

“Fwah!”

The guards, who had let their guard down when they realized that Tsuya was no fighter, fell one by one to the mystery woman’s legs. Soon, the smaller force had proved victorious and the entire chapel was under the control of Hero Gold-Hair and Nyt Security Incorporated.

Lord D’arkness glanced every which way, a look of panic on his face. “H-How could this be happening?!”

“There!” Zarmas said, vaulting down to the ground floor of the chapel. “Our target, Hero Gold-Hair! I will ztop at nothing to catch you, no matter what ztands in my way!” She pointed dramatically towards Hero Gold-Hair—only, the way she was positioned, Lord D’arkness happened to be standing directly between herself and the golden-haired man. She darted forward in a straight line, followed unerringly by the rest of the Nyt Security Incorporated team.

The four slimes from earlier appeared in front of Zarmas to block her from trampling Lord D’arkness.

“*Bloop*... Lord D’arkness! Leave this to us!”

“*Blirp*... We were too late earlier, but this time will be different!”

“*Blap*... Now, prepare yourself for—” But that was as far as they got.

“Out of the way!” Zarmas shouted, sending all four slimes flying with a single kick of her heels.

Lord D’arkness was between a rock and a hard place. The Nyt Security Incorporated team was coming from in front, while Hero Gold-Hair was waiting behind. And all around him, Valentine and Riliangiu were wreaking havoc. “Guaaards!!!” he wailed. “Aim for Hero Gold-Hair! He’s the weakest, isn’t he?!” The remaining guards in the area all turned to rush Hero Gold-Hair as one.

“Damned nuisances!” Hero Gold-Hair cursed, wielding the Drilldozer Shovel as fast as he could to dig hole after hole. The guards fell into the pitfalls one after another, but there were too many of them, and Hero Gold-Hair’s holes were starting to fill up. The effort of digging at such a fast clip in the middle of a close-range melee was starting to wear him out. “Ngh... This isn’t looking good...” he muttered to himself as he blocked a guard’s incoming sword with the hilt of his shovel.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Lord D’arkness laughed as the guards began to overwhelm Hero Gold-Hair. “Wonderful! Splendid! No reason to take him alive, you hear? Smash him to a pulp!” Suddenly, however, he was interrupted by a loud *craaash!* as an oversized carriage charged into the guards’ ranks.

“*Hero Gold-Hair!*” Aryun’s voice came from the carriage as she came to a screeching halt right beside him. “*Sorry to keep you waiting! Aryun Keats is back in action!*”

“Good to see you, Keats! I was getting worried!” Hero Gold-Hair said, as Aryun Keats transformed back into her humanoid form. When he saw what she was holding, however, Hero Gold-Hair’s eyes went round. “W-Wait... Where did you get *that?*” he asked, dumbfounded by the sight of Aryun Keats holding a grilled skewer in both hands.

“Ah ha ha!” Aryun laughed. “My depleted magic power is restored, thanks to a quick trip to the buffet they had set aside for the wedding party!” she declared, returning to stuffing her cheeks.

Looking closer, Hero Gold-Hair noticed that Valentine, who was standing in the middle of the chapel and taking on all comers, was also devouring mouthful upon mouthful of food as she fought. “Usually she can’t do much of anything because of that appetite of hers...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered to himself, before clearing his throat and turning back to face Lord D’arkness. “Well, there you have it. Let’s try this one more time!”

“Tch!” Lord D’arkness spat. “I-I suppose my best bet here is to take Culbiez and...run?” He reached out to grab Culbiez’s hand, but Culbiez was no longer beside him, where she had been only moments earlier. Then his eyes settled on Tsuya, who had been quietly leading Culbiez away by the hand. “You! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Waaah!” Tsuya cried, jumping up in shock. “H-He noooticed me!” She ran off, pulling Culbiez along as she made her escape.

"Wretched woman!" Lord D'arkness spat, bearing down on Tsuya with an expression of fury on his face. "Planning on using a hostage to escape, are you?"

"Awaaah?!" Tsuya sped up, dragging Culbiez behind her in a mad dash.

Tsuya ran and Lord D'arkness pursued...and soon, Tsuya, who didn't have much stamina to speak of in the first place, was nearly out of breath. "I-I can't go ooon..." she wailed, teetering on wobbly legs and collapsing on the spot.

"Bwa ha ha!" Lord D'arkness laughed, coming up from behind with triumph in his eyes. "Prepare to meet your doom!" He swung his sword, only to be intercepted by Riliangiu, who charged in from the side and used her arm blades to knock the sword out of Lord D'arkness's hands.

"Good job, Riliangiu!" Hero Gold-Hair hurried to Riliangiu and Tsuya's side, swinging the Drilldozer Shovel with all his might, scoring a clean hit to Lord D'arkness's face with a resounding *claaaang!*

"Agah... Agagahhh..." Lord D'arkness stammered, falling to his knees and then collapsing face-first to the floor, his butt sticking up in the air in a very undignified pose.

Hero Gold-Hair gave Lord D'arkness's butt a solid poke, but the man gave no response whatsoever. He seemed to be out cold. "Well, that settles that, I suppose," he said with a satisfied nod.

Suddenly, Culbiez looked right at Hero Gold-Hair. "M-Mister?!" she exclaimed. The light seemed to have returned to her eyes. Perhaps being dragged along by Tsuya had snapped her out of Lord D'arkness's spell.

"That's right," Hero Gold-Hair said with his most charming smile. "You're safe now." Culbiez ran forward and hugged him tight, pressing herself up against his chest and crying her eyes out as Valentine, Riliangiu, and Aryun Keats kept the guards around them at bay.

Snap! The sound of Zarmas's whip striking the floor made everyone in the chapel go still. "Thiz man, Lord D'arknezz, iz under arrezt az the leader of a counterfeit currency ring!" she declared, glancing around at the assembled crowd. "Anyone who interferez will be arrezted az well!"

The guards somehow went even stiller. "H-Hang on..." one of them said. "Leader of a counterfeit currency ring? Is that true?"

"You know…there *are* all those rumors about Lord D'arkness…" said another.

"And that Shadow King guy he's been working with seems like some serious bad news…" agreed a third. Zarmas's words seemed to have seriously compromised the guards' morale.

The Shadow King and the demon fox sisters watched the proceedings from their second floor balcony seat.

"Well…" the Shadow King muttered. "It seems like we rode *this* train as far as it'll go. I suppose we'd better make our exit."

"R-Right away!" yipped Kintsuno.

"We have a getaway carriage waiting in the back!" Gintsuno volunteered. And with Gintsuno leading the way, the three beat a hasty retreat.

"Just you watch!" the Shadow King declared with one last spiteful look at the scene in the chapel before vanishing down the corridor. "The day will come that this world will be under my control!"

The Shadow King and his companions left the Kingdom of Castolia shortly thereafter, never to return.

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Zarmas's declaration seemed to have completely destroyed the Castolian guards' willingness to fight. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, Zarmas directed Nyt Security Incorporated to apprehend Lord D'arkness and the rest of his staff, rounding up and arresting the lot of them.

Phufun stood alongside Zarmas, still in the elegant dress she had worn to the wedding. "We, the Dark Army, will take custody of Lord D'arkness himself," she offered.

The harpy familiars who had accompanied her hoisted Lord D'arkness at Phufun's instructions, carrying him out of the chapel. Lord D'arkness had disguised himself as a human, forged counterfeit currency, and attempted to marry First Princess Culbiez all in a bid to gain control of the Kingdom of Castolia. As his true form had turned out to be demonic in nature, however, the assembled parties agreed that it would be best for Phufun to take him to the Dark One Dawkson for judgment.

Culbiez watched as the harpies carried Lord D'arkness away. "Mister?" she asked, turning to Hero Gold-Hair. "Is Lord D'arkness gone for good?"

"I'd say so," Hero Gold-Hair said, patting the princess on the head. "You're free to do what you like now!" he declared, laughing loudly.

"F-Free..." Culbiez repeated.

"That's right," Hero Gold-Hair said. "Your struggle is over."

Culbiez seemed momentarily stunned at Hero Gold-Hair's words. Then the weight of everything that had happened hit her all at once and she collapsed to her knees, covering her face with both hands and weeping messy tears.

Hero Gold-Hair draped his own cape over Culbiez's shoulders and gently patted her back. "Good. Go ahead and cry your eyes out whenever you feel like crying. You can always get back on your feet when you run out of tears."

Culbiez stayed by Hero Gold-Hair's side for quite some time, and cried and cried and cried.

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A few days later, a company of knights from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode arrived in Castolia. They had been sent to determine the truth or falsehood of the claim that the Kingdom of Castolia had been responsible for producing the so-called wizard gold. In their investigations, the knights discovered the wizard gold factory within Castolia's borders and began to look into the individuals involved with the operation.

They learned that it was Lord D'arkness who was behind the counterfeit currency with help from the Shadow King and his cronies. The Shadow King's own organization had been in charge of operating the factory, however, and with them gone, there was nobody left to punish for the crime of forgery. As for Lord D'arkness, the one behind the whole scheme, he had already been sent before the Dark One Dawkson and sentenced to a thousand years of hard labor in the underground workshop beneath the Dark Citadel—work for which he would not earn even a single coin.

The Shadow King, meanwhile, had the manufacturing of counterfeit currency and conspiring to take over the Kingdom of Castolia added to his already impressive list of crimes. As he had once been king, however, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode refrained from sending wanted posters to all corners of the land like they had with Hero Gold-Hair, instead electing to treat him as a special case.

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First Princess Culbiez stood in her private chambers in Castle Castolia, looking out the window with her hands folded in front of her chest, gazing at the road as it stretched off towards the horizon.

"Are you looking for that man?" Zarmas asked, stepping up beside the princess. Zarmas had promised Culbiez that she would remain in Castolia until the land recovered from the chaos that had followed in the wake of Lord D'arkness's arrest to provide her with security.

Culbiez silently nodded in response.

"That man iz a criminal az well," Zarmas said. "Zay but the word and I will go at once to—"

"No," Culbiez said, shaking her head emphatically. "There is no need. Before that gentleman visits us again, I must rebuild this land into a kingdom I can be proud to call my own. Until then, I am in no hurry for us to meet again."

Culbiez gave the road one last look before turning from the window and exiting the room. Her cheeks were flushed pink, a single tear rolling down her cheek. Nevertheless, the expression on her face was one of solid resolution.

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Aryun Keats rolled along the road near the border of Castolia in her carriage form, Hero Gold-Hair and company sitting comfortably inside.

"Hero Gooold-Hair, are we reeeally going to leeeave without saying goodbye?" Tsuya asked, cocking her head inquisitively.

"We managed to exchange that wizard gold for real proper coins, didn't we?" Hero Gold-Hair said, folding his arms. "There's no reason for us to stay in that kingdom."

"I seeee..." Tsuya said, sidling up close to him. "Well, if it's okay with yooou, it's okay with meee. Good jooob, Hero Gooold-Hair!"

"You too, Tsuya," Hero Gold-Hair said with a smile, "And you as well, Valentine, Riliangiu, Keats. All of you did great," he added, nodding to the rest of the group.

"Speaking of which..." Riliangiu said. "I'm glad we were able to exchange the wizard gold for real coins, but was it really wise to handle it in the manner you did? Just taking the money from a carriage you found parked outside the castle...”

“Of course it was,” Hero Gold-Hair answered. “Don’t worry about it.”

“E-Even if you say we shouldn’t worry, I can’t help but think—”

“We exchanged the wizard gold for an equivalent amount of coins, right and proper,” Hero Gold-Hair said, cutting Riliangiu off. “There’s no problem at all.”

“B-But...” Riliangiu protested, twisting her neck. “The wizard gold...”

“Now, now!” Valentine laughed, cheerfully smacking Riliangiu on the back. “Hero Gold-Hair says it’s all right, so don’t let it get to you!”

“That’s enough about that, if you ask me,” Hero Gold-Hair said, turning to look out the window. “Now, where to next?” *Hang on a moment...* he thought to himself. *Why do I feel like we’re forgetting something?*

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“Wuha!” The tavernkeeper’s voice echoed through the kitchen in the back of the establishment. “More plates for you to clean!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! Right away!” Wuha said, accepting the dirty plates with a note of desperation in her voice. While the others were off looking into the wizard gold, Wuha Gappoli had been left behind in the tavern at the beginning of the adventure.

Hero Gold-Hair, please come back soon! Wuha thought, tears in her eyes as she got to work cleaning the flatware.

“These plates too, Wuha dear, if you please!” the tavernkeeper said, bringing in a fresh load.

“Yes, ma’am!” Wuha cried out, stifling a sob. “M-My pleasure!!!”

Aryun Keats, meanwhile, was carrying the rest of the party far away, leaving for lands abroad.

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In another tavern, somewhere in the realm, the Shadow King was just finishing his dinner. He reached for his coin purse to pay for the meal, but the moment took a look inside, he recoiled in shock. “I-It can’t be...” he said, cold sweat running down his brow.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Shadow King?” Kintsuno the Gold asked, noticing that something was amiss. Gintsuno the Silver watched on, frowning quizzically.

The Shadow King’s shoulders were shaking with fear. *Why...?* he thought. *How did our money all turn into wizard gold?!*

Indeed—the coins in the Shadow King’s purse were entirely counterfeit!

I was certain that the money we brought out of Castolia was real gold! the Shadow King thought, his mind racing. *But this is wizard gold, I’m sure of it! And now that our scheme’s been found out, using this money is going to be exceptionally dangerous...*

“Sh-Shadow King...” Kintsuno said. “These coins...”

“Are those...wizard gold?” Gintsuno asked.

The sisters stared wide-eyed at the coins in the Shadow King’s hand.

The Shadow King and his associates had hidden a supply of coins in a carriage outside Castle Castolia in case they had to flee the kingdom in a hurry. What they didn’t count on, though, was Hero Gold-Hair, who found their stash and exchanged it for the wizard gold he had been carrying. The Shadow King, however, was perfectly clueless as to what could have possibly happened. All he could do was sit there, shaking in impotent fear.

Chapter 4: Garyl and Ben’ne

◇Land of the Rising Sun—Ichimu-an◇

After finishing their dinner, Flio’s party decided to pay a visit to Ichimu-an’s public bath. Itsuhachi had recommended against it, reminding them that as honored guests they had private baths in their own rooms, but Folmina insisted.

“I wanna get in the big bath!” she said.

“If big sis Folmina says so, I want to get in the big bath too...” Ghoro agreed.

“I agree!” said Garyl. “We came all this way—I’d like to try the public bath!”

“That’s right,” Rys nodded. “We did come all this way, after all!” And with Rys and Garyl in support of the idea as well, the whole group decided to take a trip to the public baths.

“Ahhh...” Flio sighed as he sank into the bath, stretching out his arms and legs. “It’s nice to go out to the bath from time to time, isn’t it...?”

“There’s no beating the bath at home, but it’s good to have a change of pace sometimes!” Garyl agreed, stretching out alongside his father.

“Huh?” Suddenly sensing something, Flio glanced in the direction of the bath’s changing room.

“What’s wrong, dad?” Garyl asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Flio said, cocking his head quizzically. “It seemed like someone was just about to enter the bath, but a moment later their presence disappeared.”

Just then the doors to the changing room swung wide open, revealing Wyne, fully naked and grinning from ear to ear. “Wahoo!” she cried. “Bathing with Gare-Gare and dada!”

Needless to say, this was the men’s bath.

“Wha?!” Garyl exclaimed, waving both his arms in an attempt to get his sister’s attention. “W-Wyne! You can’t come in here!”

"Whaddaya mean? Whaddaya mean?" Wyne asked, completely ignoring Garyl's attempts to stop her from entering. "I can get in just fine-fine! Ah ha ha!" she laughed, leaping into the air to dive in the water.

"Wyne! Wait!" This time it was Elinàsze who came running into the men's bath, dressed in a towel. She held out her arm and the jewel on her forehead shone with rainbow-colored light—as did Wyne's body. The next moment, Wyne, who had been in mid dive, vanished right before she touched the water's surface.

A second later, they could hear a tremendous splash coming from the women's bath, followed by a chorus of alarmed voices.

"Eeek! Big sis Wyne fell from the sky!"

"W-Wyne! You mustn't go diving in the bath!"

Elinàsze, it seemed, had sensed that Wyne was about to enter the men's bath in time to forcefully teleport her to the women's bath instead using her magic. "I-I'm terribly sorry, papa! I should have noticed what Wyne was up to before she caused such a commotion..." she said, bowing deeply and exiting the bath.

What a lovely day! Elinàsze thought, a giddy smile on her face as she returned to the women's bath. *Thanks to big sis Wyne's antics, I was able to catch a glimpse of papa in the nude...*

Elinàsze loved her father Flio a great deal—to the point that it was developing into something of a complex.

◇Meanwhile—The Women's Bath◇

"No fair, Eli-Eli! That was mean-mean..." Wyne grumbled, glaring up at Elinàsze with just her nose sticking up out of the water and forming air bubbles with her mouth as she talked. Her hair was soaking wet, a consequence of her dramatic aerial entry into the bath.

"Oh, Wyne, what am I going to do with you?" Rys said, chuckling to herself as she patted the dragonewt's head. "You know you're not supposed to go in the men's bath."

"Mm..." Wyne hummed, her mood improving almost immediately at having been given head pats. "I love you, mama! I love you!" she said, beaming as she hugged her mother tight.

"Yes, yes, I love you too," Rys said, pulling Wyne into her arms with a smile.

"U-Um..." Rylnàsze started, coming up to the two of them from behind. "M-Might I also...you know..." It was clear she wanted Rys to dote on her as well as Wyne, but Rylnàsze seemed unable to articulate that. Her face was turning bright red from sheer embarrassment.

"Here, Rylnàsze," Rys said, smiling kindly as she pulled her youngest daughter close as well.

"A-Ah! Th-Thank you!" Rylnàsze said, hugging her mother tight. She still seemed to be fairly nervous.

"There's no need to be so tense, my darling!" Rys told her, rubbing her cheek up against Rylnàsze's.

Balirossa watched Rys and her children from a short distance away. *Th-That's right...* she thought, nodding decisively. *I-I'm a mother as well, now. I could even do such things with Folmina and Ghoro...* "F-Folmina? Ghoro?" she said, glancing in her children's direction. Ghoro had been allowed in the women's bath as he was still very young, and was currently clinging tight to his beloved older sister Folmina. "W-Would you like to bathe with me, perhaps?"

"I'm fine with big sis Folmina..." Ghoro answered.

"Ah ha ha!" Folmina laughed, hugging Ghoro tight. "Ghoro's such a sweetie!"

I see... Balirossa thought, the look on her face giving every appearance that her soul had just departed from her body. *I'm no good after all, am I? Nobody ever dotes on me in the bath, even at home. How could I have forgotten...?*

I guess moms have problems of their own, huh... Rislei thought, smirking wryly at the scene as she rinsed off her body.

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Early the next morning, Garyl found himself running alone down the city streets near Ichimu-an.

Ever since he started to study swordsmanship, Garyl had adopted the habit of waking up to do early morning runs as a training exercise. Today, too, he had woken up while the others were still asleep. He somehow managed to extricate himself from Wyne's arms without waking her and crept out of the room to go for his regular run, careful not to disturb Elinàsze, Rislei, Folmina, or Ghoro.

Garyl replayed the events of last night in his head as he ran through the unfamiliar streets. "I could have sworn I heard some kind of commotion outside our room last night..." he muttered to himself. "I wonder what that was about."

It was before dawn, and a fog lay over the nighttime city, limiting his visibility. With his Search spell active, however, Garyl was able to stay keenly aware of his surroundings as he sped along.

"Huh?" Suddenly, Garyl stopped. His Search spell had detected something. He closed his eyes, expanding the area covered by his magic. In the mental map provided by the spell, he saw something just around a corner ahead. Whatever it was, the indicator on the map seemed to be blinking repeatedly in and out of existence. "What in the world is *that*?" Garyl asked, cocking his head as he glanced in the direction of the mysterious presence. A second later, however, he burst into a cheerful smile. "Well, whatever it is, it sure seems interesting! I guess I've just gotta check it out!"

Garyl ran off in the direction indicated by the map. As grown-up as he had become, it seemed, Garyl remained as curious as ever.

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Garyl rounded the corner and came upon a bridge. "The thing my Search spell's detecting should be right in the middle of this bridge…" he said, going to investigate.

"*Boy…*" As he stepped onto the bridge, Garyl heard a low voice that seemed to come from the mist itself. "*If you wish to pass this bridge, you must first surrender your sword…*"

Before Garyl's eyes, a woman stepped out of the mist. She was a tall, slender figure wearing a white hood over black priestly vestments, carrying a large naginata in her hands and a large basket on her back. Inside the basket was a truly large collection of swords, tossed inside in a haphazard jumble with no care for the blades themselves.

"I'm sorry…" Garyl said, looking the woman up and down carefully. "But I don't have any swords on me."

The woman clicked her tongue. "*Then I have no business with you,*" she said. *"Begone at once. None may cross Ijo Bridge save the one who can defeat me.*" She turned her back to Garyl and started to melt into the mist she had come from.

"Wow!" Garyl gasped, his eyes shining with wonder. "Are you a psychic construct or something, miss? That's a really cool ability, vanishing into the mist like that!"

"*Well, now…*" The woman stopped in her tracks and slowly turned back to face Garyl again, peering at him out of the shadows of her white hood. "*You are not frightened by my appearance, are you? On the contrary, you seem to already be appraising my abilities. Fascinating. I believe I like you, boy. Would you care to cross blades with one such as I?*" The woman took a sword from her basket and casually tossed it in Garyl's direction, getting on guard with her naginata herself.

"No thanks, I don't need it," Garyl said, throwing the sword back to the woman and transforming his hands into lupine claws, assuming a low fighting stance.

"*Ah!*" the woman exclaimed. "*Boy, are you of the rumored demon folk who reside in the West?*"

"I'm Garyl!" Garyl said, giving the woman a friendly grin that seemed oddly mismatched with the lethal claws that had sprouted from his arms. "My mom's a lupine demon, but my dad's just a really incredible human!"

"*I am the one known as Ben'ne the Sword Hunter,*" the woman said. She spun her naginata round, bringing it to a rest in the crook of her left arm, her right hand thrust outwards in a dramatic pose.

It looks like Miss Ben’ne’s body doesn’t fully exist in this world... Garyl thought. *I wonder if she’s some kind of psychic construct, like Miss Damalynas. Well, whatever she is, it looks like she packs a punch...* “All right!” he said, psyching himself up. “Here I come!” He kicked off the ground, rapidly closing the distance between him and his opponent.

“*Prepare yourself!*” Ben’ne said, spinning her naginata in a circle as she charged forward to meet Garyl’s approach.

Clang! Ben’ne’s naginata and Garyl’s claws clashed in the very middle of Ijo Bridge.

“*Nh?!*” Ben’ne exclaimed, taking a step back. “*Well struck, boy...*”

“You too, miss!” Garyl said, stepping back himself and meeting Ben’ne’s gaze with his own. Meeting each other’s attacks just the once had been enough to give both Garyl and Ben’ne a healthy mutual respect for their opponent’s strength. “I was really disappointed when the tournament got suspended,” he said. “But I’m glad I happened to run into an opponent as strong as you!”

“*Likewise,*” said Ben’ne. *“In all the centuries I have spent challenging those who would cross this bridge to a contest of arms, you are the first I have seen who can fight with such mastery.”*

Garyl slid into an even lower stance than before, lowering his weight onto one leg and stretching the other out behind him as Ben’ne watched carefully, holding her naginata at the ready behind her.

“Hah!” Garyl darted forward.

“*Hmf!*” Ben’ne exhaled, swinging her naginata in perfect time with Garyl’s movements. She swung the blade in a wide sweeping attack, aimed right for her opponent. Garyl, however, merely hopped up and landed right on top of the naginata’s blade. “*Wh-What?!*” Ben’ne cried, trying to quickly pull the weapon back.

Garyl, however, was faster. From his perch atop the naginata, his sharp claws had nothing preventing them from reaching Ben’ne’s throat. The whole exchange took less than a second.

“*My first loss...*” Ben’ne said, kneeling down and placing the naginata at her feet. “*In all the time I have spent challenging warriors, you are the first to overcome me...*”

“Thank you for the match!” Garyl said, a friendly smile on his face as he returned his arms to their normal human form. “That was a lot of fun!”

◇Ichimu-an—Main Hall◇

As the sun rose above the horizon, Flio and the rest of his party reunited in the Ichimu-an’s main hall, where they had eaten dinner the previous night.

“*Fwaaah...*” Wyne yawned loudly. “Mornin’-mornin’...” Sitting up, she still seemed half asleep, with her eyes closed and her head drooping against Elinàsze.

“Really, big sis Wyne, wake up, will you?” Elinàsze said, casting a quick Awakening spell on her sister. Wyne, however, showed no sign of opening her eyes.

“The breakfast here is quite good,” Rylnàsze said, glancing over at Rys between mouthfuls of fried egg and rice. “But I think I like mama’s cooking better...” she added, smiling softly and blushing ever so slightly.

“Oh my! Thank you, Rylnàsze!” Rys said, beaming with delight.

Itsuhachi, who was waiting on the group like she had last night, judged that the time was right to replenish the party’s empty plates. “We have plenty more, if you like!” she said, stepping up to the table with a wooden container of cooked rice and sitting down to help serve. “Please, feel free to eat your fill!”

“By the way,” said Flio, looking up from his own bowl of rice and turning to face his son. “I take it you went for a run this morning, Garyl. How did it go?”

“Oh, yeah, I did!” Garyl replied with a cheerful smile. “It was lots of fun!”

When she heard those words, Itsuhachi moved in front of Garyl with impressive speed considering she never stood up from her proper sitting position as she moved—legs folded underneath and back straight. “Garyl-sama,” she said, “I certainly wouldn’t ask you to refrain from running, but I must implore you to please take care to avoid the area of Ijo Bridge, just ahead of this inn...”

“Why?” asked Garyl. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“I don’t know if I would put it that way, exactly...” Itsuhachi said. “However, that area is home to a somewhat troublesome mononoke...”

“A mononoke?” Elinàsze asked.

Itsuhachi took a moment to consider before speaking. “I suppose it is no secret,” she said, adopting a conspiratorial tone as if she were telling a ghost story to children. “I believe in your homeland, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, mononoke and their ilk are called by the name ‘psychic constructs.’ That is the sort of being that has haunted that bridge since ages out of memory.”

“A psychic construct?” Folmina asked, cocking her head innocently. “Like Auntie Damalynas?”

“F-Folmina!” Balirossa hastened to correct her. “You know Damalynas hates it when you call her that”

“Heh...” Rislei covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a chuckle. “It fits her if you ask me...but it *is* a little rude to say so.”

“Ahem!” Itsuhachi glanced around the table and cleared her throat before returning her attention to Garyl. “Some say this mononoke was a monk during her life...others say she was a mercenary who hailed from lands to the west. At first, she was a hero who would punish the wicked and rob them of their swords. But eventually she became obsessed with taking the blades of skilled warriors, and so she would challenge any she deemed worthy. Even after her physical body was destroyed, her soul lingered as a mononoke—a psychic construct. She still haunts the bridge today, forcing any swordsman of sufficient prowess into a duel, should they be so unlucky as to cross her path...”

“*What a terribly rude thing to say...*” came Ben’ne’s voice. “*I do not force anyone to duel me. I am always certain to ask first.*”

“Wh-What?” Itushachi’s eyes blinked open in surprise. “Wh-Who was that?” she asked, looking all around in confused distress. “Unless I am very mistaken, nobody who spoke like *that* was present last night, were they?”

Before Itsuhachi’s eyes, a cloud of mist took form directly behind Garyl. When it had grown thick enough, a woman wearing a white hood and black monk’s vestments stepped out. It was Ben’ne, the woman Garyl had fought and defeated earlier that morning.

Itsuhachi leaped back from the apparition, her eyes growing wide. “I-I-It can’t be! Y-Y-You’re the mononoke of Ijo Bridge! Wh-Wh-What are you doing *here*?!” She reached into her kimono and produced a number of paper talismans. “Mononoke-repelling talismans! Take that!” she declared, tossing the strips of paper in Ben’ne’s direction and making a sealing motion with her right hand. The talismans shone with light, activated by the magic gesture, and flew straight for their target.

Ben’ne, however, merely swatted the talismans away with a single hand. “*I would ask you to wait before jumping to conclusions,*” she said. “*Besides, a talisman of such feeble strength would be unable to so much as scratch my skin.*”

“J-J-Jumping to conclusions?” Itsuhachi asked. “Wh-Whatever do you mean?”

Ben’ne shook her head in benign exasperation, spreading her arms wide in a show of friendship. “I am here to serve the one I have chosen as my master. My only intention in manifesting like this was to correct your misapprehension concerning myself. I certainly do not wish for any of you to come to harm.”

Itsuhachi’s wide eyes somehow shot open wider still. “Excuse me?” she asked. “Your...master, did you say?”

“*Indeed...*” Ben’ne intoned. “*My master. Earlier this day I had the privilege to face your Garyl-dono in a contest of arms in which I, Ben’ne, tasted true defeat for the first time, utterly stymied at every turn. It was...exhilarating.*” Ben’ne gave a good-spirited laugh, gracefully hiding her open mouth behind the tips of her fingers.

“There’s no reason to put yourself down, Miss B!” Garyl said, smiling cheerfully. It seemed he had taken to calling her Miss B as an affectionate nickname. “The match only lasted for a second, and I don’t think I beat you by *that* much. You were a really tough opponent! I had a great time!”

“*Not at all!*” Ben’ne demurred, smiling happily herself. “*There are no accidents in a duel. Everything that transpires between two fighters is the result of the habits they accumulate in their daily training. My loss to you, therefore, was always inevitable.*”

Flio and the rest found themselves smiling too at the good-natured exchange between Garyl and Ben’ne. Murasame released her hand from the hilt of her sword, seeing that the mononoke and Garyl were getting along famously.

“Then you didn’t come here to cause a disturbance...” Murasame said. Just then, however, it struck her. She looked up, sharing a look of realization with Itsuhachi.

“Wait...just a moment...” Itsuhachi started.

“Garyl...” Murasame continued. “You defeated Ben’ne in a duel?!” The two of them sidled up closer to Garyl and Ben’ne, staring in shock.

“I happened to win today, that’s all,” Garyl said, grinning brightly. “What matters is we had a good time! That’s more important than winning or losing.”

“*Not at all,*” objected Ben’ne. “*I was utterly defeated. Truly, you are the one worthy of being my master.*” The two shared another smile.

Itsuhachi stared on in disbelief. *Th-They say Ben’ne the Sword Hunter of Ijo Bridge has challenged some hundred victors of the Hi Izuru Grand Tournament, none of whom could land even a single attack against her. And she says she was utterly defeated...?* she thought. Murasame stood next to her, mouth agape as she stared mutely at the cheerfully smiling Garyl and Ben’ne. She must have been thinking much the same thing.

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“Thank you for your hospitality!” Flio said, bowing his head to the staff of Ichimu-an at the entrance.

“Thank you for your hospitality!” echoed the rest of the party, bowing as well.

The Ichimu-an staff bowed low in response. “We await your next visit!”

Ben’ne, for her part, accompanied them out, following closely behind Garyl as if her presence were only natural.

“Are you going to come along with Garyl, Miss Ben’ne?” Flio asked.

“*I am,*” Ben’ne answered, bowing low. “*The very reason I began challenging passersby to engage in combat was to find one who was worthy to be my master. Now that Garyl-dono has defeated me and proved himself deserving of my service, it was my intention to accompany him and serve as his familiar.*”

“But of course!” Rys said, nodding in understanding. “It’s only natural you would acknowledge him as your master, after he defeated you like that!”

Rys was still a demon at heart, so she had a deep reverence for power. Suffice to say, she identified deeply with Ben’ne’s position.

“*I will remain within the mist when I am not needed to avoid inconveniencing the people of your house,*” Ben’ne said. “*I thank you for your understanding...*” As she spoke, the mist welled up around her, quickly enshrouding her body, which vanished from sight.

I see... Flio thought, smirking despite himself. *I guess we have* *another new resident, then. Well, at least I won't have to prepare any new rooms this time around...* The faces of Ura and the rest of the village he had transplanted outside Blossom Acres the other day appeared unbidden in his mind.

The party left the inn and continued along the road as its path led along the nearby river. "We were supposed to spend today supporting Garyl in the sword fighting tournament, weren't we?" Elinàsze remarked with a sigh. "But now that it's been suspended from the divine beast attack, I'm not sure what we're going to do all day."

"A-About that..." Murasame said, looking oddly flustered as she stepped up in front of the group. It had been her suggestion that Garyl take part in the tournament, and she seemed to be somewhat excessively self-conscious that it had been canceled. "I discussed this with Miss Itsuhachi last night. If you are all willing, perhaps we might pay a visit to the city's shopping district?"

"The shopping district?" Flio asked, his expression visibly brightening. "I'd love to go. I'm very interested to see what kind of items they have for sale in Hi Izuran shops. What do the rest of you think?" he asked, looking behind him at the rest of the party.

"Far be it from me to object to my lord husband's decision!" Rys declared with a smile and nod. "And personally, I would like to see if we can perhaps purchase some of the cloth they use to make Hi Izuran kimono..."

"Do they have tasty food? Do they?" Wyne asked, running eagerly up to Murasame.

"Y-Yes, of course!" Murasame answered. "There are many shops that sell Hi Izuran confections."

"Yaaaay!" Wyne cheered, jumping up and down in her excitement. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"But...Miss Wyne..." Murasame said, utterly dumbfounded. "You only just ate twenty bowls of rice with your breakfast! Can you really eat again so soon?"

"I wanna buy souvenirs for everyone anyway," Rislei said. "I'm in."

"And I would like to see the weapons they have on display," Balirossa said, glancing at the katana on Murasame's belt. "I have something of an interest in traditional Hi Izuran swords..."

Murasame breathed a sigh of relief as Flio's family began chatting excitedly about the trip to the shopping district. *It looks like* *everyone's happy with this... Thank goodness,* she thought. "Very well," she said. "Then I will show you the way."

◇Meanwhile—Behind Ichimu-an◇

In the shadows behind Ichimu-an, the inn where Flio's party had stayed the night, Itsuhachi stood with folded arms, glaring furiously at a group of men and women numbering in the dozens, all kneeling on the floor with their heads bowed. These were the emissaries for the noble families who had tried to recruit Flio the night before.

"I am very disappointed in all of you," she said. "I told you plainly that the Hi Izuru Ministry of Foreign Affairs forbade you from disturbing Flio-sama—and yet!" Itsuhachi struck the bambu sword in her hand hard against the ground. The emissaries, still kneeling, visibly startled at the sound. Itsuhachi looked around at the group before her, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "Twenty-one intruders attempted to contact Flio-sama in the bath! Thirty-eight attempted to sneak into his room at night as he slept! What in heaven's name were you all thinking?!" She struck her bambu sword against the ground once again. "In any event, you are to remain here and reflect on your actions until Flio-sama returns to his home country! Am I understood?!"

"We're very sorry!" the group replied as one.

As it turned out, the presence Flio had felt before Wyne entered the bath the night before as well as the commotion Garyl had overheard in the hallway while he was lying in bed had both been instances of the nobles' emissaries attempting to sneak into Ichimu-an in order to meet with Flio only to be repelled by none other than Itsuhachi.

My master told me I was to entice Flio-dono to our side no matter what... one of the emissaries thought. *What was I to do?*

Alas, I was unable to make it past Itsuhachi, with her high level ninja abilities... thought another.

Perhaps there is still some way out of this situation... wondered a third.

Itsuhachi regarded the group in front of her sternly, bambu sword clutched tightly in her hands.

◇A Shopping District near the Checkpoint◇

Murasame led the party to a shopping district located just outside the checkpoint. “You will find more shops here than anywhere else in the Land of the Rising Sun,” she said. “Many of the goods on sale here are one of a kind. Just seeing what they have on display is worth the trip all on its own. If you are interested in the food, there are samples you can taste to see what you think of —”

“Samples?!” Wyne exclaimed, ever alert to promises of food. Grinning deliriously, she bolted off towards the shopping district entrance with all the force of an arrow shot from a bow.

“W-Wait, big sis Wyne!” Elinàsze cried as she chased after the dragonewt. “They’re only samples, remember! You mustn’t eat the whole thing!”

“I wanna try the samples too!” Folmina declared, heading off after Wyne as well.

“If big sis Folmina’s going, me too...” Ghoro said, following along.

Folmina noticed Ghoro tagging along and took his hand in hers. “Don’t let go of my hand, okay? We wouldn’t want you to get lost!”

“Okay...” Ghoro said, nodding happily.

“You’re a good big sister, Folmina,” Garyl said, patting the girl on the head as he walked along behind. “And you’re a good boy for listening to your sister, Ghoro,” he added, patting Ghoro on the head as well.

“Tee hee hee!” Folmina giggled. “Head pats from big bro Garyl! I’m so happy!”

“I’m happy too...” Ghoro agreed, a smile on his face.

“You’re a great big brother too, Gare,” Rislei said, glancing over at the three of them as she walked along beside them.

“You think so?” Garyl asked, suddenly shy. “I’m not doing anything out of the ordinary, though...”

Rylnàsze chose just that moment to run up. “Can I walk with you, big bro Garyl?” she asked.

“Of course!” Garyl said, offering Rylnàsze his hand. “Ready?”

Rylnàsze took her brother’s hand, smiling with delight. Flio watched on with a smile on his face as the five children set off in a group together, Garyl at the center. *Garyl has really grown up fast,* he thought. *But I suppose it’s only to be expected with how close he and Miss Ellie have gotten lately...*

“Garyl’s become so responsible, hasn’t he?” Rys observed, sidling up beside her husband.

Flio cracked an amused smile—it seemed that he and Rys had just been thinking the same thing. “He really has. You couldn’t ask for a more responsible big brother.”

Rys nodded happily in agreement as they, too, stepped foot into the shopping district.

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Elinàsze stood with her arms folded in front of one of the shopping district’s many establishments.

“Excuse me...” Rylnàsze began. “What are you doing, big sis Elinàsze?”

“Rylnàsze,” Elinàsze said, pointing to the display of sweets in the shop’s storefront. “Would you take a look at this?”

Rylnàsze followed her sister’s finger to see a steamed bun in the shape of a baby bird. The label next to it read: “*Chickling Manju Bun.*”

“Um...” Rylnàsze ventured. “Is something the matter with the Chickling Manju Bun?”

“The problem is what’s next to it,” Elinàsze said, turning her gaze to the nearly identical steamed bun sitting right alongside the Chickling Manju Bun. Its shape could have been a perfect duplicate.

“That’s another Chickling Manju Bun, isn’t it?” Rylnàsze asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“No,” Elinàsze said with a sigh. “It is not.”

“Really?” Rylnàsze asked, surprised. She took another look and saw that this one’s label read: “*Baby Thunderbird Manju Bun.*” “What? B-But it looks perfectly identical! Then, why does it have a different name?”

“And that isn’t all...” Elinàsze continued, pointing to a third identical bun beside the other two.

“Um...” Rylnàsze said. “This one looks just like the Chickling Manju Bun too, doesn’t it?” She looked down to see that the label for this one read: “*Baby Inferno Avis Manju Bun.*” Next to that was an “*Original Chickling Manju Bun*,” then a “*Chick-Chick Manju Bun*,” and a “*Baby Volcano Rukh Manju Bun*.” Each of them looked indistinguishable in all but name. “The boxes they’re packaged in look slightly different as well...”

“I tried a sample of the buns,” Elinàsze said, “and their flavors are all identical."

"What?" Rylnàsze asked. "R-Really?" The two sisters stared at the baby bird buns, utterly flummoxed by the mystery.

Murasame watched from a short distance away, wishing that the two of them would move along. *I-I couldn't possibly explain that one...* she thought. *I only hope they don't decide to press the matter too deeply...*

Rislei, meanwhile, was inside a store not far away. "What are those?" she asked, looking inquisitively at the key chains displayed on one of the shop walls.

"Ah, these?" the woman who was tending shop said. "These are key chains, each featuring the kamon of one of the noble families who govern the various regions of Hi Izuru."

"Kamon?" Rislei asked.

"Yes, kamon," the woman said. "You hail from the West, are you not? Perhaps I could liken them to the flags used by Western kingdoms."

"I see..." Rislei said, peering closely at the key chains. "Hi Izuru has quite a lot of noble families, then, doesn't it?" *Come to think of it, Reptor collects key chains...* she thought. *I bet he'd be happy if I bought him one of these.* She looked them over and quickly selected one she found attractive. "This one with the flower patterned kamon is nice," she said, taking two and heading over to the register. "I'll take these, please."

"Thank you very much!" the shopkeeper began. "But...miss, I see you have two of the same item. Is that correct?"

"Y-Yes, that's right," Rislei said, suddenly flustered. "H-Hurry up and wrap them, please!" *I'm so embarrassed...* she thought. *I can't believe I'm getting us matching key chains...*

Garyl, meanwhile, was standing in front of a shop selling souvenirs, his arms folded in contemplation, hemming and hawing, when Flio and Rys happened to walk by.

"Garyl? Is something wrong?" Rys asked.

"Oh, hi, mom..." Garyl said, frowning. Then Rys noticed he had a piece of paper clutched tight in his hand. On it was a list of names that seemed to stretch on forever.

"Whose names are written on that paper you have, Garyl?" Rys asked.

"These are all the people who showed up to cheer me on during fencing club practice, or who gave me food and stuff..." Garyl answered. “I was thinking about getting everyone some kind of souvenir, but it looks like it’s gonna cost more money than I expected…”

“I see…” Rys said, stepping up to her son. “Well, I’m certain they’d appreciate something from a store, but perhaps something handmade might be in order?”

“Handmade, you say?”

“That’s right. How about making sweets for everyone once we get home using ingredients from the Land of the Rising Sun? You could save a decent amount that way, I expect.”

“Good idea!” Garyl said, nodding in understanding. “I hadn’t thought of that!” Smiling, he politely bowed his head. “Thanks, mom. Once Folmina and Ghoro are done shopping here, I’ll try looking for cooking ingredients!”

Folmina and Ghoro were in the shop ahead of them, cheerfully looking over the items on display. Garyl, it seemed, had been watching over them from a short distance away even while doing his own shopping.

I’ve been keeping an eye on everyone too, using my Search spell… Flio thought, smiling as he watched from behind. *But it’s good to know Garyl and Elinàsze are looking after the other children. That way I can look around on my own without worrying about the others too much.*

“My lord husband!” Rys said, taking Flio’s arm in hers. “Let’s look over there!” She pointed towards a shop farther on ahead packed wall to wall with fine textiles, hurrying them quickly along. Rys’s eyes sparkled at the sight of so many colorful bolts of cloth. “Indolian cloth is excellent, but these Hi Izuran fabrics are every bit as wonderful!” she gushed, examining one after another at a rapid clip. “I simply must try making something out of this!”

Flio smiled as he watched his wife at work. *Rys just can’t resist a new kind of cloth to work with,* he thought. *She’s been obsessed ever since she started making clothing for the children. These days she’s gotten so good we’ve been selling her designs at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store…*

Flio was, of course, absolutely correct. Rys had been hooked on designing and creating outfits ever since she started creating handmade outfits for the children of the house. She had even taken it on herself to design the clothing items for sale in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

“Oh my!” Rys exclaimed as she browsed. “This one is excellent too! And I wonder how this fabric would look paired with that...”

Rys is such a perfectionist, though. It takes her so long to make a decision... Flio thought, smirking wryly as he watched his wife compare the bolts of cloth to each other, inspecting each and every one. *Still, it’s amazing how serious she is about making the right decision. I’m glad I get to see this side of her. I suppose it’s nothing to complain about...* Flio started looking over the bolts of cloth himself as he waited for Rys to finish. *Now then, I’d better get ready for my part—the payment at the end.* Flio had been a merchant in his home world, and negotiating prices was one of his specialties.

The shopkeeper watched Flio from behind as he quietly but deliberately looked over the merchandise and swallowed nervously. *This gentleman...* they thought. *He seems to know what he’s doing...*

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Flio’s party finished their shopping by midday and left the shopping district, headed for the checkpoint. “That textile shop really was excellent!” Rys remarked. “And it cost us hardly any money at all!” She was clearly in high spirits, humming a cheery tune as she walked along.

Well, I’m glad Rys is happy... Flio thought, wincing to himself as he recalled their expedition to the textile shop in question. *But I can’t help but worry I haggled a bit too hard. The old man at the shop seemed like he was on the brink of tears by the time we left...*

“Hahh...” Wyne sighed in satisfaction, giving her fully belly a couple of hearty snacks. “That was good-good!”

Elinàsze and Rylnàsze couldn’t help smirking at their older sister’s behavior. “I can’t believe big sis Wyne ate all those bowls of buckwheat noodles at that ‘wanko soba’ restaurant after all the sampling she did earlier,” Elinàsze remarked. “She must’ve eaten more than a hundred!”

“And she tried even more samples after that—*and* brought all those snacks to take home with her too,” Rylnàsze agreed. “She really has an incredible appetite!”

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed, taking one of the steamed buns she had bought earlier and tossing it into her mouth. “I can eat more-more still!”

“O-Oh, really?” Rylnàsze asked.

“For sure, for sure!” said Wyne, offering Rylnàsze another of her steamed buns with a smile on her face. “They’re really good! You wanna try-try, Ryl-Ryl?”

Rylnàsze flinched and shook her head. “O-Oh, no thank you!” she said. “I’m very full already...”

As the party chatted among themselves, Itsuhachi led them to where Black Heboll was waiting. The workers at the checkpoint hadn’t just kept him fed, it turned out. They must have given him a bath as well. A glance was all it took to see that Black Heboll’s scales were even more lustrous than they had been before the party arrived.

“You really thought of everything,” Flio said, bowing his head to Itsuhachi. “Really, thank you so much.” Black Heboll bowed as well, in imitation of Flio.

“There’s no need to mention it!” Itsuhachi said, shaking her head with a smile on her face. “We provide this service to all guests who arrive on a magic beast!” A group of workers dressed in black lined up behind her, bowing in unison. They must have been the ones looking after Black Heboll while he waited at the checkpoint.

The checkpoint staff watched as Flio held out his arm and cast a spell, summoning a magic circle from which appeared the carriage the party had used on their arrival. He made sure everyone was safely on board before turning to face the group who had come to see them off. “Thank you for all your help,” he said. “We’ll be sure to come back for another visit once everything’s ready for the Enchanted Frigate!”

“Of course!” Itsuhachi nodded, beaming happily. “We will eagerly await your return!”

Their parting words concluded, Flio did a second check to make sure everyone was accounted for and gave the signal for Black Heboll to take flight. He landed atop the carriage, grasping it in his talons, and with a single beat of his wings, took off into the sky. They flew higher and higher at a speed that astonished the onlookers, and soon they vanished into the clouds.

◇Half a Day Later—Houghtow College of Magic Front Gate◇

Just like the journey to the Land of the Rising Sun, it took Black Heboll less than half a day’s flight to return to the front gates of the Houghtow College of Magic.

“That was a blast!” Garyl said, stretching his arms behind his head with a cheerful smile on his face. “I had a great time in Hi Izuru!”

“I am delighted to hear that,” said Murasame, somberly bowing her head. “But I can’t help feeling like I owe you a number of apologies for the way your visit went...” It seemed she still felt remorseful over the tournament she had invited Garyl to getting canceled.

“There wasn’t anything you could’ve done about that,” Garyl reassured her. “You shouldn’t feel guilty about things that weren’t your fault. Just invite me to that tournament the next time it happens, please!”

“*I do not believe there would be any merit in your participation in such a tournament, master. Never has a victor of that tournament been a match for me in combat.*”

“Really? Huh...” Garyl replied without thinking, before suddenly stopping in his tracks in surprise. “Wait, who said that?” he asked, looking every which way for the source of the voice. In response, a cloud of mist formed behind Garyl and coalesced into Ben’ne. “Miss B?!” Garyl exclaimed in shock when he saw who it was. “Wait a minute... You were serious about coming with us?!”

“*Did I not tell you?*” Ben’ne asked. “*I have selected you as my one and only master. If you will permit it, I hope to spend eternity in your service.*” She knelt down before him, bowing deeply.

Ben’ne was a very tall woman, much taller than Garyl. Kneeling like that in public, she couldn’t help but stand out. And, in fact, there was someone staring at her at that very moment, hidden behind a wall a short distance away—Salina, Garyl’s classmate and admirer from school.

Salina had seen Black Heboll in flight from her window and had run outside, crying “My Lord Garyl has returned!” When she reached the school gates, however, she found Ben’ne kneeling conspicuously before the target of her affections.

Who is that*?!* Salina wondered, staring wide-eyed at the mysterious woman.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

After taking Black Heboll back to the magic beast pasture at the Houghtow College of Magic, Flio cast Teleportation to return the party home, where Garyl, Rys, and Elinàsze wasted no time in heading to the kitchen to get to work on making sweets to give to everyone on Garyl's list.

Garyl set the ingredients he had purchased in the Land of the Rising Sun out on the kitchen counter. "All right," he said, pumping himself up for the task ahead. "Ready to get started?"

"Of course!" said Rys, consulting the written recipe for sweet manju dumplings she had obtained along with the ingredients. "First, we must mix this 'hakuriki' flour with cold water and knead it with our hands..."

When Rys had first become Flio's wife, she could only cook dishes involving meat, be it seared over a fire or else plain raw. Tasting the meals Flio and Balirossa cooked, however, she was astonished to discover how delicious human cooking could be and just how much she had to learn. She enrolled in a local cooking school and practiced night and day to improve her skills until she reached the point that now, just from having read a recipe, she could not only create the dish but direct others as well.

"Like this?" Garyl asked, mixing the flour and water together in a large bowl and kneading it heavily.

As the three of them got to work, Rislei and Rylnàsze poked their heads in the kitchen to see how things were going.

"How's it coming?" Rislei asked. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah! Thanks Rislei!" Garyl said. "Why don't you take this anko stuff and divide it up into balls about yea big?" he instructed, pointing to the sweet red bean paste on the counter and demonstrating an approximate size with his fingers.

"'Kay, 'kay!" Rislei said, bobbing her head in agreement. "Me and Ryl will get that done lickety-split!"

"I'll do my best!" Rylnàsze concurred, nodding with determination. There were small magic beasts gathered all around her feet—her friends, who she had left behind at home during her trip. They were being even more affectionate than usual after missing Rylnàsze for an entire day. Rylnàsze, too, seemed to be delighted to see them if the smile on her face was any indication.

The group got to work, chatting cheerfully all the while, and before long they were well underway.

◇Meanwhile—In the Living Room◇

“Thank you for looking after our kids this time, Mister Flio,” Ghozal said, bowing his head in thanks as he ate the dango Flio had brought him as a souvenir.

“We wanted to come along, but there was too meowch to take care of at the store...” added Uliminas.

When he had gotten home, Flio had gone to the living room with Ghozal and Uliminas and the other adults of the house to regale them with stories of their trip to the Land of the Rising Sun. “And this,” he said, taking out a crystal to show the rest of the group, “is the Divine Beast I captured this time around, the Yamata Dragon.” He smiled his usual easygoing smile as he explained everything that had happened.

“Th-The Yamata Dragon?!” Ura exclaimed. “Th-The one sealed in Mount Gokoku over in the Land of the Rising Sun?! *That* Yamata Dragon?!”

“Um, yes, that’s right,” Flio said. “You’re familiar with it?”

“F-Familiar...” Ura repeated as he stared dumbfounded into the crystal, where he could indeed see a distorted image of the seven-headed Yamata Dragon. “I’m from Hi Izuru myself, you know. I’ve heard all kinds of stories about the legendary magic beast that had my oni ancestors completely on the ropes! I can’t believe the day would come where I’d be looking at it with my own eyes...”

“Hm! The Yamata Dragon, you say!” Calsi’im said, nodding along cheerfully as he sipped the cup of tea Tia had poured for him. “I must say, I’ve never seen a magic beast that looks quite like this one before in my life! I suppose there are still a few surprises left in the world after all!”

“Yes, it does seem quite unique...” Tia agreed, peering into the crystal curiously from the side.

“It seems to be a subclass of Beast of Disaster...” Hiya observed, floating in the air to get a look at the monster inside the crystal from overhead. “Considering its chimerici anatomy, it appears to comprise multiple individual Beasts of Disaster fused together by some unknown force. That would make it a being of exceptional rarity...”

“Huh!” Flio said, nodding in understanding at Hiya’s explanation. “So it’s a pretty rare kind of creature after all!”

A crease formed in Hiya’s forehead. *The Exalted One speaks lightly...* they thought, *but a chimera made up of multiple fused Beasts of Disaster would have many times the power of one such creature. I can* *sense that much even on the other side of the sealing crystal. And yet, he sealed such a beast as this away as if it were nothing...* They landed on the floor and, without thinking, knelt deep in reverence. *Truly, he is the Exalted One,* they thought. *Once more, I find myself utterly overcome...*

"Anyway," Flio said, his typical easygoing smile plastered on his face, "I thought later I'd take a few of its scales and try testing out a few uses..."

The Divine Beast, the Yamata Dragon, was a monster of such ferocious might it could have possibly even destroyed the world of Klyrode itself. Flio's family, however, kept on chatting merrily without any special regard for the crystal sealing it away.

◇Later—Back in the Kitchen◇

"Phew! I think that just about does it..." Garyl finished dividing the finished dumplings between a number of small bags with a satisfied look on his face.

"You really are good at this, though, Gare..." Rislei said. "Are you really gonna give all that to those hanger-on groupies of yours?"

"Hanger-ons or not, they've been showing up to support me during practice and even giving me presents and such. I'd feel bad about it if I didn't return the favor once in a while, at least..." Garyl said, wincing as he looked over the bags.

"*Well spoken, my master,*" said Ben'ne, appearing from a cloud of mist behind him. "*The consideration you show your followers is to your credit.*"

"You weren't hoping to get some manju for yourself by any chance, were you, Miss B?" Garyl offered when he noticed the mononoke's presence in the room.

Ben'ne's usual cool and collected demeanor shattered in a second. She began blushing furiously, pointing her finger at herself in an exaggerated motion. "*Wh-Wh-Who, me?!*" she sputtered. "*Couldn't be! I would never be so utterly presumptuous as to hope that my master might deign to share some of the manju he made with me... Well...perhaps I was hoping, just a little...*"

"You don't have to call me master or anything," Garyl said, smirking despite himself at Ben'ne's behavior. "I'll gladly give you some, as a friend," he said, offering her a plate.

"*Th-There is no need for such sentiments with me...but...if you truly insist...*" Ben'ne said, doing her best to sound cool and collected. The way she was drooling at the sight of the manju, however, ruined whatever chance she had to recover her dignity. Urged on by her master, Ben'ne took one of the manju and ate it. "*I-Incredible!*" she gushed with joy, forgetting herself completely. "*Utterly delicious!*"

Garyl beamed happily at the sight of Ben'ne enjoying the food. "I'm really glad you like it!" he said, handing her another plate. "You can have more if you like!" Before she could take it, however, Ben'ne found herself interrupted...

"Thank you, thank you!" said Wyne, darting in from the side to grab the place herself—only to find her hand blocked by Ben'ne's naginata.

"*Stay back, fiend!*" she declared. "*These manju were given to me by my master! How dare you attempt to swipe them for yourself! Repent!*"

"No way!" Wyne shouted back, sticking her face right up against Ben'ne's. "No fair keeping 'em to your self-self!"

"Now, now, no arguing, you two," Garyl said, unable to keep himself from smirking in amusement at Wyne and Ben'ne alike. "Let's just get along and eat the manju together, okay?"

◇A Few Days Later—Klyrode Castle◇

In the Maiden Queen's private chambers in Klyrode Castle, Her Majesty sat down on her bed, tired from a long day's work. "Hah..." she sighed. "At long last, the wizard gold incident in the Kingdom of Castolia seems to have been resolved. But who could have imagined that there would be so many victims..." For a while she just sat there, mentally reviewing the details of the report she had been given.

It has been some time since I took the throne... she thought with another sigh. *But I am still an inexperienced ruler, and yet unequal to the burden...* At that thought she lifted her head and shook it vigorously.

"This is no time to be depressed!" she told herself. "If my father is determined to play the villain, then I must do my best to guide this kingdom on its proper course!" She steeled her face in determination, but it only lasted a second before her expression turned cloudy once again.

Still...to think the wizard gold was the work of the Shadow King too, she thought. *I swear, it puts me in a mood whenever I hear mention of that man...* She thought back to when she had first unveiled the evil deeds of the man who had once been her father and the king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode before the world, and clutched her head as if in pain. The Maiden Queen had always been serious to the point of fault, prone to worrying herself sick given the slightest opportunity.

The Maiden Queen sat gloomily in bed, sighing and sighing, until her eyes fell on the paper bag she had left on her desk. Immediately, her expression brightened considerably. “That’s right! I still have the souvenir Garyl brought me from his trip!” She hurried over to the desk, and opened the bag. Inside were several manju filled with sweet red bean paste. “C-Could it be?” she wondered, blushing ever so slightly. “Did Garyl make these sweets himself...?”

The Maiden Queen took a single manju and tossed it in her mouth. The confection’s sweet flavor filled her senses and soon she found herself overcome by a deep sense of joy. “Ahh...” she exclaimed, her eyes brimming over with tears of joy. “This is simply marvelous...”

I’ve been so busy dealing with the wizard gold incident that I haven’t had time to pay a visit to Garyl’s house... she thought. *But now that it’s been resolved, I should be able to see him again as soon as tomorrow if I’m able to get my work done quickly...* With that in mind, the Maiden Queen took another manju.

“And yet...” she said, her expression darkening once again. “Garyl really is a wonderful boy, to be able to make such delicious sweets. Meanwhile, I’ve been training as hard as I can under Lady Rys’s strict instruction and my cooking skills don’t seem to have improved in the slightest. And who *was* that woman looming over Garyl’s back when he came to visit me at the castle? I believe Garyl said she was called Miss B, but I don’t remember such a woman being a part of Lord Flio’s household... I’m sure she’s a better match for Garyl than an old and jealous woman like myself...”

The Maiden Queen, as mentioned, had always been serious to the point of fault, prone to worrying herself sick given the slightest opportunity. It seemed the day her heart would find peace was still a long ways off.

Epilogue

◇Klyrode Castle◇

In the interior courtyard of Klyrode Castle, Commander MacTaulo gazed up at one of the stone statues. “If everything keeps going well,” he said, “we should be ready to start accepting students as early as next month.”

“Has everything met your expectations?” Flio asked, standing beside the grizzled old knight commander and staring up at the statue alongside him.

“Certainly,” MacTaulo said with a satisfied nod. “The Fli-o’-Rys General Store has been a tremendous help in setting up the campus for the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education. Thanks to you, we’re going to be ready much sooner than I had ever expected. I was a little nervous about the prospect of accepting demons into our school now that we have the peace treaty in place, but with your help I think we’re set up for the best start we can have.” Suddenly, MacTaulo paused and turned to look at Flio directly. “By the way,” he added. “Does it look like Garyl’s planning on attending our institution?”

“I wouldn’t be the one to say,” Flio said. “Whatever Garyl wants to do with his life is up to him.”

“Hm...” MacTaulo replied. “I see... In that case, I guess we’ll have to wait to see what Garyl decides. But you know, my niece Rune is dead set against Garyl attending...”

“Did something happen between them?” Flio asked.

“Nothing in particular, only I might have praised that son of yours a little too much for her. It sounds like she went to observe his club activities during an open campus at the Houghtow College of Magic, only to find him flirting around with a bunch of girls,” the commander teased.

Flio just smiled his usual easygoing smile. “Oh,” he said. “I’m sure he was just doing his duties as head student and helping the club’s instructor teach the fencing club’s other students. The only one in that group who can even put up any manner of a serious fight against Garyl is the instructor herself, Miss Murasame."

"I see... So that's the way of it," MacTaulo said, nodding in understanding. "But you know...if you had told me not long ago that peace would one day come to our world, and that after all my years fighting on the front lines for the sake of humanity I would be able to live out the rest of my life as the headmaster of a university...well, to be honest, I simply wouldn't have believed you."

"I know what you mean," Flio said. "Personally, I'd say it just goes to show that it's a better world when we all get along with each other. We shouldn't treat each other any differently just because someone's a demon, or a demihuman. We're all fellow living creatures, after all."

MacTaulo nodded in agreement, and the two looked up at the grand Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, drawing ever nearer to completion.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

In front of Flio's house was a vast pasture where Sleip and Byleri took care of their herd of horse demons and equine magic beasts, and beyond that stretched the vast fields of Blossom's farm.

"The farm's gotten quite a bit bigger lately, hasn't it?" Flio observed looking out over the fields from atop a nearby hill, shading his eyes with the palm of his hand.

"Eh heh heh!" Blossom laughed proudly beside him, her arms folded and an elated grin on her face. "Old man Ura and his crew have been pulling their weight and then some! With them in our corner, we can make this farm as big as we dang well please!"

"I'm glad to hear it!" Flio said, his usual easygoing smile still firmly affixed on his face as he turned his head down to look at the little girl standing next to Blossom. "So Blossom..." he ventured. "Who is this girl?" The girl scurried to hide behind Blossom, avoiding Flio's gaze at all costs.

"Oh, this girl?" Blossom said, hoisting the girl into her arms with a grin and propping her up on her shoulders. "This here is Ura's daughter. Her name's Kora." Kora's face turned bright red in embarrassment, but it seemed like she was having fun anyway. "Kora was getting left alone in the house a lot while the old man was out working, so I told her she could tag along with me whenever the timing worked out, if she liked..."

"I see!" Flio said.

They continued talking, with Blossom carrying Kora on her back. Kora held on to Blossom's head for stability, burying her face in her hair. Every now and then, she would peek between strands of hair to steal a glimpse in Flio's direction. Flio would give her one of his famous smiles, and Kora would startle and immediately hide her face once again.

"It seems like Kora likes you quite a bit, Blossom," he said, smiling affectionately at the little girl.

"Ah ha ha," Blossom laughed. "You think so? I can't really tell with her to be honest, but she does seem to spend a lot of time around me at least." Blossom gave Kora's hand a squeeze, smiling at the girl on her back. Kora squeezed back, a happy look on her face.

"Heeeey!" Just then, they heard Ura's voice from down the road. Ura was back from his deliveries, pulling his cart behind him as he came. "Lord Flio! Lady Blossom! And Kora!"

"Old man Ura!" Blossom said, running up to meet him with a grin on her face. "Good work today!"

"Lady Blossom!" Ura greeted her. "Thank you for keeping Kora company again today. I really appreciate it."

"I told you, don't worry about it!" Blossom said, setting Kora down on the ground. "You're here working the farm—it only makes sense for me to help out when I don't have anything else to do."

"Welcome home...daddy..." Kora said, tottering up to Ura and giving his leg a big hug.

"Good to be back, Kora," Ura replied. "Have you been a good girl while I was away?"

"Uh-huh..." Kora nodded, growing red in the face. "I did what...told me..."

Huh? Flio thought, noticing something off about Kora's words. *Is it just me, or did I miss a word there...?* he wondered, cocking his head.

"Oh, you did what Blossom told you, did you?" Ura repeated.

"Yeah..." Kora replied. "Everything...told me..."

I knew it... Flio thought. *I can't hear part of what she's saying. She must be speaking too quietly to hear on purpose...* He cast a quick spell, a tiny magic circle appearing around his ear, raising his hearing abilities and enabling him to catch the words Kora was saying under her breath.

Blossom, meanwhile, squatted down to bring her eyes level to the much shorter Kora's. "You really are a good girl, Kora!" she said, grinning and patting her on the head. "Keeping your word to your papa and doing what I tell you and all!"

Blossom roughed up Kora's hair a bit around the spot where her single horn was growing in—Blossom's way of expressing her love. Kora seemed to understand that, perhaps. She did have a cheerful smile on her face when Blossom was finished.

"Yeah..." Kora said in a tiny voice. "I'll do whatever...tells me." Flio smiled when he heard what she was saying beneath her breath: "*I'll do whatever mommy tells me.*"

I see... Flio thought, glancing between Blossom and Ura. *So Kora thinks of Blossom as her...*

"Would you like to join us for dinner, perhaps?" Ura offered.

"Sure!" Blossom agreed readily. "If you'll have me, I'd love to come!" Soon, she and Ura were talking cheerfully. They left Kora holding Ura's hand in her right hand and Blossom's in her left.

"My lord husband!" called Rys, hurrying over from the direction of the house. "My lord husband, I've prepared a lunch for us! Would you like to find somewhere nearby to eat it together, perhaps?" she offered, bounding up beside him with a happy smile on her face.

"Of course!" said Flio, smiling back at his wife. "And since we're nearby, why don't we find a good scenic spot to eat on Ura's mountain?"

"With pleasure!" said Rys, looking in the direction of the mountain herself. "And if that's our plan, why don't we ask Ura—"

"Oh, no no!" Flio interrupted her. "The two of us are going to be eating our lunch, and those three will be eating theirs! Now let's go!" And before Rys could respond, Flio cast a spell. A magic circle appeared beneath the couple's feet, and they vanished on the spot.

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"Wh-Whatever was *that* about, my lord husband?" Rys asked, plainly startled by being abruptly teleported halfway up the mountain.

"Sorry to do that all of a sudden without any explanation..." Flio said. "I just...you know...I wanted it to be just the two of us today, you know?"

At Flio's words, Rys's cheeks flushed bright red and her eyes visibly lit up. "M-My lord husband, I'm so happy to hear you say that!" she said, wrapping her arm around his, her tail materializing in order to wag furiously.

Knowing Rys, I can't imagine she could bring herself to leave well enough alone if I told her about Ura and Blossom... Flio thought as he pulled Rys in closer. *She'd end up doing all sorts of things to try and get those two together...*

Rays of sunlight filtered in through the clouds, illuminating the couple's faces as they walked.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 11

◇Deep in a Forest◇

A great two-headed winged beast descended from the sky, its two heads each letting out a long breath as their body became engulfed in light. The creature grew smaller and smaller until it took the form of a human man, slender and short of stature. This was the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, a former member of the Infernal Four. After leaving the Dark Army they had taken up residence deep in a forest, where they now lived a peaceful life with their children and three wives.

A woman ran up to the man, carrying a hoe over her shoulder. "Hugi!" she said. "Is something the matter? You'll give me a heart attack if you keep flying up into the sky with no warning like that!" This was Cartha, a girl from a farming family who resided in the nearby village. She had fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi's human form at first sight, and after trying time and time again she finally succeeded in earning the coveted position of wife. Now she lived in Hugi-Mugi's hut in the forest, along with their two other wives.

"It was nothing, Cartha, yes!" Hugi-Mugi answered. "Yes, nothing to worry about. Only some poor unfortunates, yes! Yes, very poor..." Even in their human form, with only the single head, Hugi-Mugi always spoke with two distinct voices.

"Poor unfortunates?" Cartha asked.

"Yes, yes! Some magic beasts tried to make a nest in the new Enchanted Frigate station, yes! Yes, we were informing them of their mistake..."

"Oh no!" Cartha gasped, her brow furrowing with worry. "How terrible! Will our children still be able to go to school, do you suppose?"

"Well, it was a little frightening for them, yes," Hugi-Mugi said. "Yes, but we are certain those magic beasts won't do anything like it again!" they added, smiling cheerfully.

"I suppose not..." Cartha said, a worried look on her face as she wrapped her arms around one of Hugi-Mugi's. "You're so frightfully strong, Hugi. I'm sure the children will be safe with you around...but I really wish you wouldn't push yourself too hard! Even if you're certain everything will be okay, I can't help but worry..."

Hugi-Mugi laughed merrily. "There's no need to worry, yes! Yes, no need at all! We are frightfully strong after all, yes!"

Cartha, however, still looked distressed. She hung her head low, clinging to Hugi-Mugi's arm.

"W-Well, yes..." Hugi-Mugi conceded, wrapping their arms around Cartha and pulling her head in close. "Yes, well... We suppose we can at least be careful, yes. Yes, but there really is no need to worry so much!"

"Mm..." Cartha mumbled, finally seeming to relax in Hugi-Mugi's arms. "I know..." she said, a smile returning to her face. "Um..." A blush crept into her cheeks as she looked up at Hugi-Mugi with pleading eyes. "Th-There's still some time before the children return from the Houghtow College of Magic, you know..."

"Hm, yes?" Hugi-Mugi replied. "Y-Yes, wh-what about it?"

"Oh, would you stop playing dumb?" Cartha said, sulking ever so slightly. "Don't make me spell it out for you!"

Just then, they heard a pair of women's voices shouting from the woods around the hut. "Aha!" they cried, bursting out of the trees and running towards Hugi-Mugi and Cartha. One—Shino—was wearing a priestess's habit as she ran along the path through the forest. The other—Mato—came from the animal path leading up to the nearby mountain peak and carried a large basket on her back.

Shino came from the same village as Cartha, where she served as a priestess at the local temple. Like Cartha, she had also fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi the moment she laid eyes on them. Now she lived with the doppeladler as one of their wives. She spent her days tending to the village's sick and injured.

Mato, meanwhile, was a traveling merchant who Hugi-Mugi had rescued when she came under attack by bandits in the forest. She made the decision to live with Hugi-Mugi to pay back her debt of gratitude, but in that time she too fell in love and became the third of their wives.

"Cartha!" Shino cried, fury in her eyes as she came stomping up to her co-wife. "Were you trying to do *you know what* with Hugi while I was away in the village?! How dare you!"

"How dare you indeed!" Mato agreed. "Didn't the three of us all make a solemn promise not to try and cut in line?!"

"O-Oh!" Cartha said. "I-It's just, you know...I was so relieved just now that I suppose I forgot myself! Aha...aha ha ha..."

"Don't you 'aha ha ha' me!" shouted Shino.

"This isn't something you laugh about!" said Mato. "Really, how despicable..."

Hugi-Mugi looked around as their three wives all began to argue, innocently tilting their head. "You all want to spend time with me, yes?" they said. "Yes, then why don't we all spend time together?"

All three of the women's faces blushed bright red, their eyes opening wide.

"Huh?" said Cartha.

"Eh?" said Shino.

"Oh?" said Mato.

"O-Oh..." Cartha said. "B-But...the children will be here soon..."

"We do still have some time before they show up, don't we?" said Shino.

"W-Well..." said Mato. "I suppose so, when you put it that way..."

The three all drew close to Hugi-Mugi, fidgeting nervously as they led their wives inside...

When the group went to pick up their children from the Enchanted Frigate station later that day, they were being even more affectionate and touchy than usual with their husband. Suffice it to say, the children had no idea what to make of their behavior.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

In the throne room on the second floor of the Dark Citadel, Dark One Dawkson, master of that grand edifice, sat as he always did on the floor in front of his throne. His minion Phufun stood ready to his side.

"Master..." Phufun said, pushing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose.

"Yeah? What's up, Phufun?" answered Dawkson.

"You still refuse to sit on the throne, I take it?" Phufun ventured, adjusting her glasses once again.

Dawkson spared a glance for the succubus and sighed. “It makes me happy to know you think I should, but I’m not gonna,” he said. “It wouldn’t feel right, y’know?”

“But...” Phufun protested.

“Really, it makes me happy to know you think I should,” he repeated. “But I’ve said all I wanna on the subject. Hit me with the daily reports, okay?”

“Y-Yes, Master. As you command,” Phufun said, bowing politely and looking over the paperwork in her hands. “The Infernal Lady Belianna has been busy improving the security of your domain,” she read. “She reports no major incidents or rumors of note in the past several days.”

“I see,” Dawkson said with a satisfied nod. “Glad to hear it.” Phufun nodded in agreement.

When Dawkson had reigned as the Dark One Yuigarde, if Phufun had given him a report like that he would have bellowed something like, “*Whaddaya mean there’s nothing?! Is everyone just slacking off again?!*” and been utterly unable to listen to reason. Phufun found herself deeply grateful that he was now willing to simply take the information under advisement.

“And? Anything else?” Dawkson asked.

“Yes, Master,” said Phufun. “The Princesses Nerona, Selinaphott, and Snow White have invited you to join them for supper this evening...”

No sooner had the words left Phufun’s mouth than Dawkson slumped his shoulders in disappointment. “Those three *again*?” he said, heaving a sigh. “Are they just showin’ up every day now?”

“They are...” Phufun confirmed. “And, if I may, it might be unwise to continue to refuse invitation after invitation from representatives of such powerful demon tribes.”

“Callin’ them the representatives of their tribes makes the whole thing *sound* all official...” Dawkson grumbled. “But you and I both know they’re only here to make small talk and try to convince me to take one of ’em as my bride...” He sighed again, turning to look straight at Phufun.

“Is something the matter?” Phufun asked, noticing her master’s gaze and pushing her glasses up the ridge of her nose.

“Hey Phufun,” Dawkson said. “Got any plans tonight?”

“My plans?” Phufun replied. “I was thinking of spending tonight working on my pharmaceutical research. Why do you ask?"

"It's no problem if you put that off till tomorrow, is it?"

"Not at all. It's just a project I've been working on in my spare time, as a hobby of sorts. It's nothing particularly urgent."

"In that case," Dawkson said, "go tell the three of 'em I'm eating dinner with you tonight."

"W-With...me?" Phufun asked.

"That's what I said" was Dawkson's curt reply. And with that he stood up and hurried out of the throne room, leaving Phufun behind.

Phufun bowed deeply as Dawkson departed. "Well then," she said, pushing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. "I suppose I will have to tell the three of them that the Dark One must sadly refuse their invitation, due to urgent plans of his own..."

Coqueshtti of the Infernal Four, the little mad scientist girl, watched from her post in the side of the room. *Oh, my!* she thought, glancing at Phufun out of the corner of her eye. *Am I just imagining it, or is Lady Phufun blushing...?*

◇Houghtow City—Blossom Acres◇

"Sniff, sniff... *Waaaah!!!*" In one corner of Blossom Acres was a sprawling complex home to the goblins who worked on the farm. One of the dwellings there belonged to Hokh'hokton, who currently found himself staring agape as the woman occupying his house wailed with lamentation, tears streaming down her face. This was the former goddess Telbyress.

"Telbyress..." Hokh'hokton ventured. "I'm very sorry the tree you were using to hide your stash of liquor vanished to gods-know-where when Mister Flio brought Ura's mountain here..."

"*Hic... Wah...*" Telbyress cried.

"But really..." the goblin continued. "What *is* the need for all these tears? If you need liquor, just work for the money and go buy it!"

"*Sniffle...* B-But..." Telbyress managed between sobs. "O-One of the bottles I had stashed there was a super rare super limited Red Waomachi! I might never get my hands on one of those ever again! *Hic...*"

"Ah, that truly is a shame..." Hokh'hokton conceded. "And yet...*why* exactly do you find it necessary to cry on *my* bed? You have a bed of your own, don't you? Wouldn't you rather sleep there?"

"*Sniff*... B-But...if I cried on *my* bed, I'd get it all wet and gross!" Telbyress complained, loudly blowing her nose on Hokh'hokton's bedsheets.

"What are you doing?!" Hokh'hokton demanded. "Did you just blow your nose?! Are you blowing your nose on *my sheets?!*" He shook his head. "Or rather...if *you* find it gross to sleep on a bed like that, did it never occur to you that *I* might find it gross as well?!"

"*Wah*... B-But I shouldn't *have* to do gross things..." Telbyress cried.

"Aha! There it is! That ridiculous egotism of yours! I've had it up to *here* with your attitude, you know!" Hokh'hokton stamped his foot, glaring daggers at Telbyress as he pulled out a large wooden box from the far end of the room.

"*Hic*... *Hic*... Wait, *what?!*" Telbyress exclaimed, her eyes going wide as Hokh'hokton produced a bottle of liquor. The words "Red Waomachi" were written on the label, plain as day.

"I tell you..." Hokh'hokton snapped. "I asked Mister Flio to retrieve your liquor for you, you know. I'm quite cross with—*Gwah!*" His speech, however, was interrupted by a suddenly rejuvenated Telbyress leaping off the bed and squeezing him tight in her arms.

"I love you! I love you so much, Hokh'hokton!"

"Hrmph!" Hokh'hokton scoffed. "What you love is the liquor I retrieved!"

"Well, of *course* I do!" Telbyress admitted. "But I love you *too*, Hokh'hokton! I'll even share a bed with you if you like!"

"The hell of burning flames will freeze over before I sleep with a lousy no-gooddess like you!" Hokh'hokton insisted.

"Don't be like that!" pleaded the no-gooddess. "Drink with me! And share my bed until the morning!"

"You can say some romantic-sounding things, but we both know you'll pass out as soon as your head hits the pillow, and then you'll end up vomiting in your sleep!" Hokh'hokton shouted back. "No! Thank! You!"

"You're so mean!" Telbyress objected. "I love love *love* you, Hokh'hokton!"

"Stop that! Quit it with the I love yous and take back your damned liquor!"

The sound of Telbyress crying with joy and Hokh’hokton snapping with rage continued well into the night.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

In the back of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was a secondary building that served as a workshop. Originally it had been used for storage, but since then Flio had expanded the basement into a two-story-deep storehouse, enabling him to repurpose the building towards increasing the shop’s production. At first Flio had taken it on himself to develop all the merchandise for sale, but lately he had assembled a team dedicated to creating magic items with Hiya at its head. However...

Hiya stepped into the workshop only to stop in their tracks. There was a man in one of the rooms, in the middle of casting a spell. “Oh?” Hiya said. “I recognize you... You were at the Houghtow College of Magic, if I’m not mistaken...”

“Oh?” the man echoed, looking over his shoulder back at Hiya. “You know of me? I suppose I’m flattered.” He turned around to face the djinn, a smile on his face. “Allow me to introduce myself properly,” he said, touching his right hand to his chin in an elegant pose and bowing deep. “I am Metálzobi, teacher of projection art at the Houghtow College of Magic.” Having completed his self-introduction, Metálzobi returned to his work.

“Ah,” said Hiya. “So you were the one Madame Uliminas hired to produce our commemorative picture cards.”

“Indeed,” Metálzobi answered. “I heard a rumor that the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was looking to hire staff with an aptitude for visual art, and so I headed to interview for the position straightaway. Thankfully, I was deemed fit to hire. Of course, I asked for a contract that would allow me to continue to teach classes at the Houghtow College of Magic as well...”

“Yes, I heard we had hired someone from Madame Uliminas,” Hiya said. “Now, let me see...” They stepped up, taking a close look at the cards Metálzobi had created. “Indeed, you have skills worthy of a teacher of magic projection art. The craftsmanship is excellent. And not only that...” They plucked up one of the cards depicting a rather serious-looking Garyl. As they did, the picture’s expression changed to a cheerful smile. “I see you have enchanted them to change their expression, as well.”

"Of course!" said Metálzobi. "A simple trick for an expert of projection art! The staff you have working on your current line of cards are all excellent artists in their own right, of course, but such diversions are my specialty."

"I see..." Hiya said, peering deeply at Garyl's expressions in the picture card. They snapped their fingers, summoning a blank card of their own, and conjured a brush with a wave of their hand, magically directing the brush to paint in midair using minute motions of their fingers.

"Aha! What a splendid technique!" Metálzobi gasped in awe as he watched Hiya work. Suddenly, however, Hiya stopped.

"How peculiar..." Hiya said, furrowing their brow. "That was meant to be a perfect copy of the card you designed..."

"Oh?" Metálzobi said, tilting his head to look at the card in Hiya's hand. It did resemble Metálzobi's card to a certain extent, but the brushwork was exceptionally crude. It looked for all the world like a doodle done by a child.

"Tell me," Hiya asked. "Why did mine come out so poorly?"

"How do I put this...?" Metálzobi considered. "Artistic skill is just like magical ability—one must train diligently day after day if they hope to gain expertise..."

"Hmm..." Hiya mused, nodding in understanding at Metálzobi's words. "I see..."

Hiya, the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness, was a spellcaster par excellence. Their artistic talents, however, would take some time to develop.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

Classes had ended for the day, and the members of the Houghtow College of Magic fencing club gathered in the arena for club practice.

"Really though..." Elinàsze said with a deep sigh as she got to work cleaning the spectator seats on the second floor. "Having all these people observing our training for the open campus event has been quite a lot of trouble..."

"No helping it, I guess," Rislei said with a smirk. "Since Gare gave everyone those dumplings as souvenirs from the Land of the Rising Sun, his popularity's been higher than ever. People were already fanatical about him, but now it's on a whole other level."

“Honestly,” Elinàsze sighed, shaking her head in exasperation. “That boy just can’t stop seducing women despite himself, can he?”

“No kidding...” Rislei agreed with a bitter laugh. She glanced down at the first floor, where Garyl and Reptor were busy tidying up. She could see the flower crest key chain she had given Reptor dangling from his belt. *He’s wearing the key chain I got him as a souvenir from Hi Izuru...* she thought, a smile coming over her face. *I’m glad...*

“Rislei?” Elinàsze asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Huh?” Rislei said. “Oh! U-Um, no, not at all! I’m fine!”

“Hmm...” said Elinàsze. “Well, that’s good, I suppose. Now, let’s hurry up and get this over with. The longer we spend cleaning, the less time we’ll have to train with Garyl.”

“Y-Yeah, right away!” Rislei nodded and got to work sweeping the floors.

◇ ◇ ◇

After they finished cleaning, the fencing club began their training while Rune watched wide-eyed, frozen stiff in her seat. She had come all the way to the Houghtow College of Magic by Enchanted Frigate to observe the fencing club’s practice, but now she found herself trembling in awe at the exchange of blows taking place before her eyes. “Wh-What’s going on?” she muttered. “How can this be possible?”

“Hah!” Murasame swung her sword in a rising motion, her whole body rising up with the force of the blow. Murasame hailed from the Land of the Rising Sun, far to the east of the Magical Kingdom, and was dressed in a traditional outfit from her homeland—a sort of overcoat called a haori, paired with a style of voluminous trousers known as hakama.

“Whoa! Nice one, Miss Murasame! That was fast!” Garyl’s voice sounded cheerful as he met Murasame’s blade with his own, parrying with the blade held parallel to the ground and stepping into the attack.

That isn’t just a block... Murasame thought. *He’s going to deflect it to the side and come in with an attack of his own!* She planted her foot down, closing the distance between herself and Garyl to take the strength out of his counterattack. Garyl, however, read her movements perfectly and struck her on the back with the hilt of his sword, striking her down with pure arm strength despite his stance putting him at a disadvantage. “Haah!” she cried. Her forward momentum was halted, but Murasame didn’t panic for a second. She withdrew, returning her sword to a guard.

“Here I come!” Garyl said, charging forward himself. He had a cheerful smile on his face, clearly at ease despite the ferocity of the duel. Murasame, on the other hand, pursed her lips in serious concentration as she fell back, trying desperately to check Garyl’s blade. The exchange was over in the blink of an eye.

“H-Hey...” Reptor, a lizardfolk member of the fencing club, said as he watched the bout in disbelief from across the arena. “Did anyone see what just happened?”

“Not me,” said Rislei, who was sitting beside him watching Murasame and Garyl’s exchange of blows. “I couldn’t tell what was going on at all...” She squinted her eyes, trying as hard as she could to follow the action, but it was completely hopeless. Their movements were far too fast. “There’s just no way...”

Even Elinàsze, who was sitting next to Rislei, had deep furrows in her brow as she watched. Her eyes, as well as the jewel on her forehead, both shone with rainbow-colored light. “I can imagine...” she said. “I would never be able to see what was happening at that speed without my magic.”

Elinàsze was born with a jewel on her forehead, a sign of the goddess’s blessing, that shone whenever she released her full magic power. It was that jewel that served as the wellspring for her prodigious magic reserves. With all of her magic power focused on amplifying her sense of vision, Elinàsze could just about make out what Murasame and Garyl were doing. That being said, if her concentration lapsed for even a second, she would miss a great deal of action, hence the creases in her brow.

Nearby, Salina, Irystiel, and Snow Little—three more of Garyl, Elinàsze, and Rislei’s classmates—were watching in a somewhat less studious manner.

“Did you see how wonderful my Lord Garyl was?” Salina cooed, hearts in her eyes as she clutched her hands together in front of her chest. “Even Miss Murasame can’t keep up with him!” She bounced up on her knees in her excitement, her pink miniskirt fluttering as she bobbed up and down.

Irystiel, who was wearing her customary black gothic lolita style dress and sitting beside Salina, held her stuffed cat doll in front of her face. “Lord Garyl’s amazing! Absolutely wonderful!” the doll said, opening and closing its mouth courtesy of Irystiel’s ventriloquism skills. “That’s what Irystiel says anyway! Mreowr!” Irystiel was quite the shy demon indeed. She used her stuffed animals as an intermediary in order to overcome her difficulties in communicating with her classmates…but her stuffed cat, unfortunately, seemed to have something of an attitude problem. “But more importantly, have some shame, you hussy! All you ever do is get in Lord Garyl’s way! Irystiel thinks so too! Mreowr!”

“How dare you?!” Salina sputtered. “I only wore this outfit because it emphasized my natural cuteness!”

Irystiel’s ventriloquism was always getting her into arguments with her friends. At the very least, though, it did achieve her original goal of facilitating communication with her classmates, for better or worse…

As Salina and Irystiel began their customary exchange of vitriol, Snow Little kept her attention fixated on the sparring match. “Garyl really does look quite dashing today…” she said, resting her cheeks in her hands and staring dreamily at the boy.

Snow Little was one of the fable folk, a tribe of demons with the ability to summon tangible manifestations of characters from the fairy tales of various worlds. Currently she was using that power to create a number of miniature dwarves—barely taller than her feet—playing a rousing chorus on their various musical instruments in support of Garyl. Snow Little sat in the middle of them, wearing a white dress.

“Snow Little!” Salina scolded her. “Would you kindly make your dwarves cut out that awful racket?! You’re bothering Lord Garyl!”

“For once Irystiel agrees with you! Mreowr!” piped in Irystiel’s stuffed cat.

“Ahhh…” Snow Little sighed, completely ignoring the other two girls. “Garyl’s so dreamy…”

“Those three never change, do they?” Rislei said, smirking as she glanced at the trio out of the corner of her eye.

“There’s nothing wrong with a bit of friendly banter, I suppose, but I really do worry about them bothering Garyl…” Elinàsze agreed. She held out her right hand, summoning a magic circle underneath Salina, Irystiel, and Snow Little’s feet. Suddenly, the girls’ voices went silent. They were still arguing away about something or other, but now, thanks to Elinàsze's Silence spell, nobody outside the circle could hear them.

I don't think they mean anything bad by it anyway... Rislei thought as she watched the three silently flap their mouths—or the stuffed cat's mouth, in Irystiel's case. *At least this way Garyl should be able to focus on the match, I guess!*

All the while, Garyl and Murasame kept engaging in bout after bout of high-speed swordplay. Rune watched from the front row, wide-eyed at the display. "I-Incredible!" she gasped. "Such movements! I've never seen anyone in my life who could fight like that."

"Oh, Rune," Elinàsze said with a chuckle. "Garyl can move *much* faster than that. He's trying to lower his swordplay to a level the rest of us can follow."

"Wh-What?" Rune exclaimed. "H-He's *lowering* his level?!"

Rislei couldn't help laughing out loud at Rune's dumbfounded stare. "If Gare went all out, it wouldn't help the rest of our training at all!"

"Exactly!" said Elinàsze.

Just then, a cloud of mist formed in one corner of the arena, and out stepped none other than Ben'ne. "*My master Garyl-dono has defeated the likes of me—Ben'ne,*" she said. "*Or did you think him so sluggish as to be overtaken by a mere child, girl?*"

"B-Ben'ne?!" Rune gawked, stupefied. "N-Not the peerless sword master from the Land of the Rising Sun I read about in the library's compendium!"

"It is!" Elinàsze volunteered. "We went on a family trip to the Land of the Rising Sun just the other day, where Miss B lost a duel to our Garyl."

"Yeah!" said Rislei. "And she ended up coming home with us as Garyl's familiar!"

Ben'ne nodded stoically at the girls' explanation, her arms folded imposingly. "*Just so,*" she said. "*From my youth spent studying the blade until now, when my mortal body has rotted away and I have become a psychic construct, I have tasted true defeat but once, at Garyl-dono's hands. Thus did I pledge my loyalty to him, to serve as his faithful retainer.*"

Uncle MacTaulo told me I should come see what Garyl can do for myself... Rune thought, glancing between Ben'ne and Garyl. She held her head in her hands, shaking it in confusion. *But I didn't* *expect* this! *He's frightfully strong, and he has a legendary sword master doing his bidding! I don't understand what's going on anymore...*

And still, the sound of Garyl's and Murasame's blades rang throughout the arena.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Flio's household had grown to a truly impressive size since he had arrived in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, so it stood to reason that the house's baths were commensurately grand. They were divided between men and women, and were full of hot water at all times of day. Flio's magic kept the water circulating continuously, ensuring that it remained pristine.

"Ahhh..." Garyl sighed as he stepped into the men's bath. "Today was a blast, wasn't it?"

"You're always so cool, big bro Garyl..." Ghoro said, timidly following along behind. He had just finished practicing sword drills with Garyl, and his body was drenched in sweat. He looked more than a little tuckered out. Garyl, on the other hand, had hardly sweat at all and was showing no sign of fatigue whatsoever.

"I'm nothing special," Garyl said. "There's people out there who are way cooler than me, like your dad, or mine." He sat down, pouring hot water over his body to rinse himself off.

Just then, however, Ben'ne suddenly materialized behind him. "*Please, allow me to wash your back,*" she said, approaching with a lathery towel in hand.

"Wh-What the heck?!" Garyl leaped out of his seat, his face turning bright red. "M-Miss B?!" he exclaimed, hastily covering up his groin with both hands. "Th-This is the men's bath!"

"*Yes, I am aware,*" Ben'ne replied. "*It does not bother me in the slightest.*"

"W-Well, maybe it doesn't bother *you,* but it sure bothers *me*!" Garyl objected.

"*Why would that be?*" Ben'ne asked, seeming genuinely puzzled. "*I was told it is a familiar's solemn duty to wash their master's back.*"

"What?! Who told you *that*?!" Garyl asked.

"*I heard it from Hiya-dono and Damalynas-dono, who have resided in this house for longer than I,*" Ben'ne said, staring at Garyl with obvious confusion. "*Is something the matter?*"

"Why did you have to ask *those* two of all people..." Garyl moaned, covering his face with his hands. “Talk about the worst possible choice...”

“Oh? The worst possible choice, you say?” Hiya intoned, appearing in midair beside Ben’ne and alighting to the ground. “Well, if such are the words of the son of the Exalted One, far be it for the likes of me to brook a disagreement.” Both Hiya and Ben’ne were utterly naked, but neither made any effort to hide any part of their feminine bodies.

“Hey!” Garyl shouted, desperately trying to cover his increasingly reddening face. “Get out, both of you! Or at least cover up!”

“*Cover up?*” Ben’ne asked. “*I fail to see why that should be necessary. In fact, if I were to cover up, would it not impede my duty of washing my master’s back?*”

“And why should a humble servant of the Exalted One deny his very son the sight of my naked body?” Hiya added, looking every bit as baffled as Ben’ne.

It’s no use! Garyl thought. *I can’t appeal to their sense of propriety!*

And so, Garyl gave up on persuading Ben’ne and Hiya and opted instead to flee from the bath entirely.

◇Meanwhile—Klyrode Castle◇

“What was that?!” The Maiden Queen suddenly looked up from the paperwork she had been reviewing in her private chambers, her eyes shooting open. Cold sweat ran down her brow, her expression one of deep consternation. “I feel...as though something dire has happened to Garyl! Something that has to do with a woman...”

The Maiden Queen’s personality was serious to a fault, and she was always worrying herself sick over every little thing, no matter how small. At some point, it seemed, that worry had grown into a genuine sixth sense for any danger that might befall her precious Garyl.

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

“So,” Patermon said, nodding decisively, “the Enchanted Frigate line to the Land of the Rising Sun is officially set to open...”

Patermon was the shadow demon in charge of the management and administration of Fli-o’-Rys’s fleet of Enchanted Frigates. Like Greanyl, she had once served in the Silent Listeners, the covert branch of the Dark Army that answered directly to Dark One Ghozal.

“That’s right,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “Both Klyrode Castle and Hi Izuru have given their approval. I was wondering if you could head over there and oversee the construction of the boarding tower? I’m going to need you to redo the flight schedule as well.”

“Understood. I will begin immediately.” Patermon bowed deep and vanished instantly from the spot.

Now alone, Flio took a good long look at the Houghtow City Enchanted Frigate station right next door—the headquarters of the Enchanted Frigate fleet operated by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. As always, there were a great number of ships arriving and departing in the sky above. “People from all over have been able to meet and exchange goods thanks to those Enchanted Frigates, not just in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode but further abroad as well...” he mused as he watched one of the ships come in for a landing. “The Dark Citadel, the kingdom of Indol, and now Hi Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun. At this rate, it won’t be long until everywhere in the world is part of the network...”

Back before I was brought here, when I lived in the world of Palma, I always thought one of the reasons discrimination against demihumans was as bad as it was was the poor relations between the humans, who lived in the capital, and the demihumans, who lived in the outskirts. If only I could bring the Enchanted Frigate fleet to that world too... Flio lowered his head just slightly, momentarily lost in thought.

“Well,” he said out loud, “the world of Klyrode is my home now. I’ll just have to do what I can for the people living here.”

And, of course, for his beloved Rys.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. It's been five years since the first volume of *Level 2 Cheat* went on sale back in December of 2016—five years since my debut as a published author! I could have never done it without all of your support. Really, I just have to say thank you.

The content of this volume was mostly pulled from the original Land of the Rising Sun chapters. I hope you're excited to see what might happen with Miss B in the cast. At least when it comes to Telbyress the no-gooddess, everything seems like business as usual (lol). And last but not least, we finally got an illustration for another of Hero Gold-Hair's followers! Which one? I suppose you'll have to check.

The comic adaptation of *Level 2 Cheat*, meanwhile, has reached volume 4! Not only that, but *Frontier Diary* volume 3 is coming out this same month of January courtesy of the good people at Media Factory, and *Comic Jardin* will be bringing you the second volume of *Food Stall in Another World "Enishi-tei"* this February! I would be delighted if you checked those books out as well.

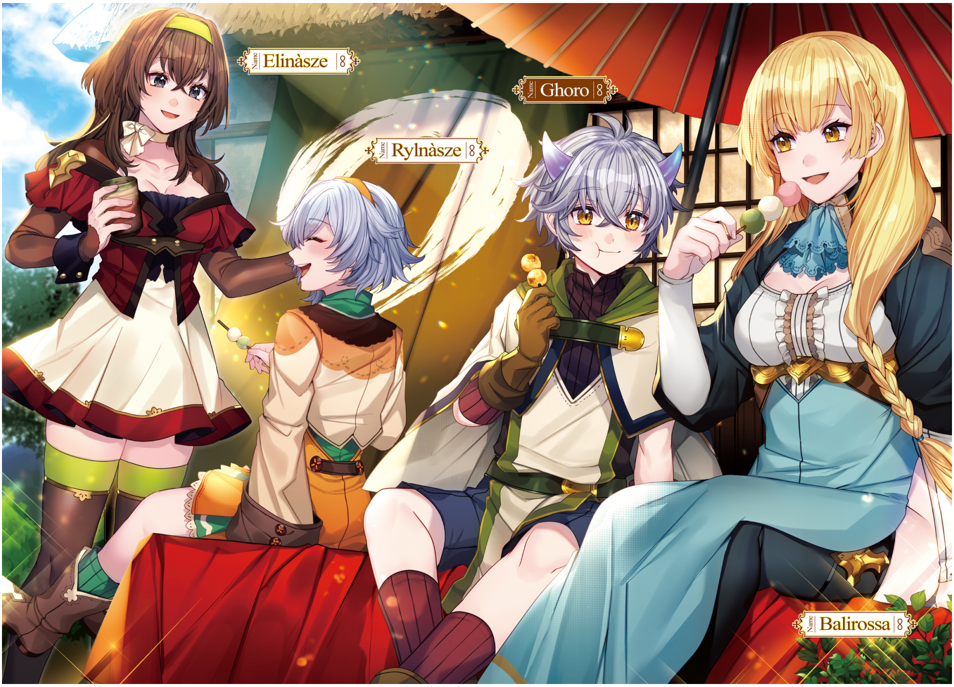
Last but not least, thank you once again to Katagiri for the wonderful illustrations, everyone who helped this book get published and all the staff at Overlap Novels, and each and every one of you who purchased a copy of this book.

January 2021, Miya Kinojo

Chillin' in Another World with Lv 2 Super Cheat Powers

11

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri


Name Elinàsze
Name Ghoro
Name Rylnàsze
Name Balirossa

Name Aryun Keats
"Bwa ha ha ha ha! Aryun, you're such a lightweight!"
"N-No more... I can't drink another drop..."
Name Wuha
Name Hero Gold-Hair

Bonus Short Stories

Elinàsze's Positive Thinking

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One night, Elinàsze was in the bedroom on the second floor of Flio's house, which she shared with her younger sister Rylnàsze. The room was divided into three chambers, one each for Elinàsze and Rylnàsze's private chambers, and a third for the two of them to share as communal sleeping quarters. That night, the two of them were sitting on the bed together as Elinàsze ran a brush through her sister's hair.

"There we go. All done!" Elinàsze declared with a satisfied nod.

"Thank you ever so much, big sis Elinàsze!" Rylnàsze said, a cheerful smile on her face as she thanked her sister.

"I keep telling you, there's no need to be so polite with me," said Elinàsze.

"Yes, so you do! Ehe hee!" Rylnàsze giggled, sticking out her tongue as Elinàsze smirked at her sister's behavior.

"Well then," Elinàsze said. "With that out of the way, we have another early morning tomorrow. Shall we get some sleep?"

"Okay!" Rylnàsze said, burrowing under the covers. "Good night!" At those words, a pack of small magical beasts who had been hiding under the bed all jumped out and gathered around. "And good night to you too!" Rylnàsze said, making the magic beasts squirm with delight. She closed her eyes, gently petting the magic beasts, and within minutes she was snoring peacefully. Rylnàsze had always had an easy time falling asleep.

Rylnàsze is such a good girl... Elinàsze thought, watching her sister snuggle up with the magic beasts with a smile on her face. *She's still learning the basic fundamentals of magic, but it seems like she must have been born with some incredible skills for befriending magic beasts. I'll just have to do everything I can to keep her safe until she grows up...*

As Elinàsze contemplated her beloved little sister, however, Rylnàsze rolled over in her sleep from her side to her back with a distinct *bounce* to her chest.

W-Wait a minute... Elinàsze thought, her eyes focusing in on her sister's unexpectedly hefty chest. *Wh-When did Rylnàsze's chest become so large? I-I'm her older sister, but her breasts are already nearly twice the size of mine!* For a while, she could only stare...until suddenly, her expression lit up. "Of course!" she said. "Rylnàsze takes after our mama! And that means that between the two of us, *I'm* the one who takes after my beloved papa!"

Having found a way to think positively about her discovery, Elinàsze snuggled in under the covers herself, a big grin on her face. "I take after papa..." she repeated to herself. "I take after papa..."

Belano's Long Night

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

It was late at night, and Belano lay on her side in bed in her room in the second floor of Flio's house. Her husband Minilio lay to her right, and their child Belalio to her left. All three had their eyes closed tight, fast asleep.

◇Meanwhile—The Hallway Outside Belano's Room◇

In the hallway in front of the door to Belano's room stood Hiya, staring at the magic circle they had conjured with a puzzled expression. "Hm..."

"No luck again tonight, your divinity?" said Damalynas, materializing next to Hiya's side.

"Indeed..." Hiya confirmed. "I concealed my presence and probed into their room, but there is no sign that they are doing any sort of training..."

Damalynas heaved a heavy sigh. "And here I was all excited to find out how a human like Belano and a magic doll like Minilio *train*..."

As an aside, when Hiya and Damalynas use the term "training," they are referring to the act of sexual congress. Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, originally had no understanding of the emotions behind sexual love beyond a basic intellectual awareness of the mechanics involved. When Hiya witnessed Flio and Rys's harmonious marital activities, however, it sparked an interest in sexual matters, leading them to recruit Damalynas, whom they had already ensnared in their mindscape, and later Maglion, a former denizen of the Realm of Evil, as partners in training.

"Oh well," said Damalynas, speaking quietly enough to not alert the people in the room. "Time to give up for the night, then?"

"No," Hiya whispered back. "I believe I will observe them for a while longer..."

Meanwhile, inside the bedroom, Belano's face grew redder and redder as she lay on her side with her eyes closed. *Those two...* she thought. *Even I can tell they're there when they speak so loudly...* She opened her eyes just a crack, enough to see Minilio lying in front of her fast asleep. *I-I* do *want to do those things with Minilio...but it's too embarrassing when I'm being watched like that! And those two could easily break through any defensive barrier I put up. I could ask Mister Flio for help, I suppose, but I'm too embarrassed to do that too! And there's no way I could talk to Minilio about it...*

Belano's mind was racing frantically as she suffered through her unfulfilled desires. It looked like it was going to be another long night.

Ghozal's Fishing and the Maiden Queen

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed heartily as he poked his head into the kitchen, a supremely smug look on his face. "How's it going, Rys?"

"Can this wait?!" Rys snapped. "I'm in the middle of teaching Ellie the basics of cooking!" Ellie—the Maiden Queen of Klyrode herself—had been visiting Flio's house two or three times a month in the name of learning the ways of the common folk of her realm, where Rys had been giving her lessons in elementary cooking.

"Hey, don't be like that!" said Ghozal, waving over the two of them. "Come check this out!" he said, gesturing proudly to the enormous marine magic beast lying on its side next to him.

"Whaddaya think? Pretty big catch, am I right?"

"You've been fishing again, I take it?" Rys asked, sighing with something like exasperation. On closer inspection, Ghozal seemed to be wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat as well, and had his magically reinforced fishing rod slung over his shoulders.

"Hrm!" Ghozal grunted affirmatively. "I could sense something huge lurking in that lake nearby and sure enough the thing came leaping onto my line!" he said with a hearty laugh.

"Well," said Rys, "I suppose it will make a good side dish for tonight's dinner."

Ellie stood behind Ghozal and Rys as the two demons spoke, staring in shock at the magic beast Ghozal had caught. *Th-That magic beast...* she thought. *If I'm remembering things correctly, it looks an awful lot like those images of Nellie, the mythical magic beast rumored to live in Loch Nell...*

"All right then," Rys said, pressing a gigantic carving knife into Ellie's hands and shocking the Maiden Queen out of her thoughts. "Here you are."

"O-Oh! Um... What?" Ellie replied.

"We are going to carve the kill," Rys explained. "The two of us."

"Excuse me...?" Ellie's eyes went wide. *D-Did she just say "the two of us"?! Meaning...that I am to carve it as well?!* Panic was starting to set in.

"I'll do the first cut, as a demonstration," Rys said, producing a blade of comparable size to Ellie's. She leapt into the air, dexterously wielding her blade and neatly cutting of a fillet of the magic beast's flesh in midair. "Now, next is your turn," she said.

"I...I..." Ellie just stood there wide-eyed and rooted to the spot, carving knife clutched tight in her hands. It seemed like her education in the ways of commoners—or, to be a bit more honest, her training to become Garyl's bride—would be rough going for a while yet.

Damalynas and the Midnight Grimoire

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One day after dinner, Flio was relaxing in his chair when who should appear but Damalynas.

“Lord Flio,” she said. “Might I have a word?”

“Oh, hello, Damalynas!” Flio said. “Is there something you need?”

“You could say that,” Damalynas said with a smile. “I heard the Fli-o’-Rys General Store just recently started dealing in magic grimoires?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Flio confirmed with his usual easygoing smile. “I happened to find a somewhat rare grimoire while I was out at the wholesaler the other day, so I made a few copies and sold them as a test run to see if there was any demand.”

At this point, Hiya appeared beside Damalynas as well. “You say ‘made a few copies’ as if it were a simple matter, but a grimoire of such rarity would be enchanted with numerous prohibiting reproduction,” they said. “In the first place, it would ordinarily be impossible to copy such a work at all...”

“There was some kind of enchantment on the book, now that you mention it,” Flio said. “But it wasn’t much trouble to dispel, so I didn’t think much of it...”

“Indeed,” Hiya gave a dry smile and bowed deeply. “You are, after all, none other than the Exalted One himself. I would no longer be surprised no matter what feat you accomplish.”

“O-On that note!” Damalynas interrupted, practically pushing Hiya out of the way. “There’s another book I might like you to copy and sell using your powers, Lord Flio, if I may be so bold...” she said. She held out her right arm and chanted an incantation, summoning a magic circle around her fingertips. Out from the circle emerged a single magic grimoire. “This is the Midnight Grimoire. It’s the book I studied in my quest to master the dark arts. Damalynas the Origin, the author of the original text, made innumerable copies of this book to spread the Midnight Arts she created all over the cosmos, and sent each to a different world. This is one of them!”

“And you want me to sell copies of the Midnight Grimoire to help spread her magic throughout the world of Klyrode?” Flio asked.

“Yes, exactly!” Damalynas beamed with delight. “I mean, it’s right there in the teachings of Damalynas the Origin. ‘Endeavor always to spread the reach of the Midnight Arts’...” she said, holding out the grimoire for Flio.

Flio, however, frowned with consternation. “Um...Damalynas...

Don’t get me wrong—I understand your feelings, but...” he trailed off, casting a quick spell and conjuring a piece of paper that clearly depicted the very Midnight Grimoire Damalynas had summoned. “This is a list of magic grimoires prohibited for sale in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and the Midnight Grimoire is right at the top of the list...”

The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was a great hub of magical research, and naturally they published a list of tomes that were forbidden for individuals to possess—magic grimoires so dangerous that their contents could lead to the end of the world if they were allowed to disseminate. It was perhaps inevitable that the Midnight Grimoire would be on the list after Damalynas herself had used the Midnight Arts contained therein to nearly destroy the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

“I-It can’t be...” Damalynas muttered, clutching at her head as she glanced over the list.

I do understand how she feels... Flio thought, smirking to himself. *But I’m afraid I can’t help her with this one.*

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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 11
by Miya Kinojo

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